En Memoria

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/15554976.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Voltron: Legendary Defender

Relationships:
Keith/Lance/Shiro (Voltron), Shklance

Characters:
Lance (Voltron), Keith (Voltron), Shiro (Voltron)

Additional Tags:
Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Supernatural Elements, blood mentions, Eventual Smut, slowburn, Vampires, Minor Character Death, Minor Veracxa

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2018-08-03 Completed: 2019-06-14 Words: 254,473 Chapters: 28/28

En Memoria

by flyingisland

Summary

This isn't a story about pain or tragedy, not really. It's not a story about loss or mourning, or monsters that creep through the dark and unsuspecting night. It's a story, instead, about hope and moving on, in memory of an innocent life lost, of an endless winter, and a love so beautiful that it survives even beyond death.

Notes

En memoria de una vida inocente perdida, de un invierno sin fin, y un amor tan hermoso que perdura más allá de la muerte.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This isn’t going to work again.”

The car around them rumbles, shaking over uneven, icy terrain through the thick black of night. Under minimal streetlamps, the man behind the wheel can catch short glimpses of his partner resting in the backseat—those translucent eyes reflecting light in a way that reminds him of bobcats caught in the glow of flashlights in the night, by hunters turned around in mountain forest in search of a wounded kill of their own, who might soon find themselves caught between those razor-like claws, who might soon realize with shocking clarity what it might feel like to suddenly become a hunted thing.

And he imagines that the title of “hunter” is befitting for his partner, nestled in a too-big, too-puffy coat. Glowering through the foggy glass of the backseat windows and surely imagining that he’s running instead through those thick, graying piles of snow pushed into the gutters of the streets.

He can see those spindly limbs in his mind’s eye, spread out and pumping with a speed that he might not be able to register. Running wild like a big cat through thick grass, charging after some helpless thing with a pulse and warm blood before plunging his claws into it.

He shakes his head, focuses on the road. They’ve been driving for hours now, aimlessly and without any concrete destination in mind. They’ll find something, somewhere where the whispers of their names are far too quiet to reach the ears of their newest neighbors. Somewhere where they can roost for a year, or two years maybe, this time. Somewhere that they can call their temporary home.

They’re nearly two hundred miles away from the last place where they settled down, before things happened, before they had to leave again, and his partner tells him, low, quiet, with a rumble of caged words masking the hopelessness that the man knows might be resting underneath:

“This isn’t going to work again.”

There’s a pause, the feeble jitter of laughter bubbling behind his own

lips. His hands tremble on the wheel. It's not fear that shudders through him, not exactly. He isn't afraid that the mountain lion in human skin who he's accepted so foolishly into his charge might someday turn on him. He knows that the wildness inside of his partner is contained by a strong chain of his remaining humanity. He isn't wondering if his final hour has come entirely too soon, right now. He doesn't tremor because he thinks that his days are through.

There's sadness that ripples through him, instead. He's wondering if the flame forever flickering inside of his partner has suddenly, startlingly died away. He's wondering what must have happened last time, different than the many times before, that might have caused him to lose faith now.

"It always works for a while," he says in rebuttal, hoping that his reassuring tone sounds more convincing than he feels about these words inside, "and when it stops working, we can go somewhere else."

I'd travel to the ends of the Earth for you.

I'm always going to try, as long as you need me to.

He doesn't know what he's suddenly done wrong. He doesn't know how to change his partner's mind. If there's a way to convince him to keep going, he needs to find it.

They can't stop this now, they can't give up when they've already come so far.

The gaunt boy in the backseat, clinging to the extra fabric bunched up from his coat, scowling and the filthy snow on shiny black streets—he's his everything. He's all that he has.

And the man doesn't know now what would be left of him if they gave this up.

"Technology is changing now. People are going to start catching on."

"Let them catch on then." He says, force in his voice, desperation that he isn't sure where it's coming from. But this is urgent, important. He needs his partner to understand that he isn't going to give in without a fight. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

There's a bark of a laugh cracking in the silence and the low hum of the car hydroplaning in the slush of half-melted ice. The streetlamps yield him nothing but a wry, glittering smile and pale, cracked lips

stretched out over too-sharp teeth.

“And what are you going to do when they come after us, huh? You’re only human.”

And the problem, he thinks, swallowing the growing lump in his throat, forcing down the anxiety bubbling up inside of him—

The problem, my love, is that you aren’t.

Lance fastens the top button on his niece's winter coat, fretting with the uneven lumpiness of it as she complains about how she already had to wear it last year, the year before, how it belonged to her brother before that, how she thinks that it’s probably over a hundred years old. It smells like mothballs, she complains. It smells musty, like dust and cobwebs and the leaky creaky basement of their apartment complex where Lance sometimes brings her to help him with their laundry. She says that it smells like a “sa-cough-amus” which Lance chooses not to correct. It smells like old people’s houses, she whines, and Lance laughs out loud at that last one. He tells her that she needs to respect old people, no matter how weird they smell.

She still looks cute, in his opinion, but he can’t deny how unsightly the mended tears and the unmatching patches covering the entirety of the old coat might look to her peers in second grade. He remembers being in her shoes too—always wearing the clothes that his siblings outgrew, never being completely “in style”, but he never had to wear a coat back home. He might have been embarrassed by his secondhand swimming trunks that his mother had tailored for him with safety pins, but he can’t imagine being a kid with judgmental peers in something like this. He makes a point of telling her how nice it looks anyway. No matter how guilty he feels for throwing her to the wolves covered in this proverbial raw meat.

It’s only been ten years since his parents moved himself, his sister, and their two older brothers from the sunny shores of Cuba to the United States—to this dark and dreary mountain town where it feels like the sun only shines for ten minutes out of the year. And the water, he laments, never feels quite as welcoming or warm in those horrible chlorine pools as it used to feel on living, breathing organic beaches. He misses feeling as though the world outside were a warm blanket

that he could wrap himself in, to comfort him. He misses feeling as though he could do anything as long as the sun kept shining so brightly.

He imagines that he just wasn't made for the cold, for a place like this. He doesn't like bundling up in so many layers. He doesn't like feeling like a blind, dumb creature fumbling around clumsily in perpetual night.

But he knows that his folks, at one point, had carted their children here in search of better opportunities, a civilization hopeful enough to support their growing dreams. And he knows that moving back now wouldn't be honoring their memories, or the shared goal that they'd buried with them in that terrible little low-income cemetery just at the furthest corner of this dreary, small town.

He thinks about them often, but more frequently on chilly winter mornings like these. His niece, now eight years old, has no memory of her grandma and grandpa. She doesn't know that they died coming home one evening just two weeks before Christmas. She doesn't know that they'd been driving home from the grocery store with their holiday turkey frozen in its bag, the peas and the mashed potatoes and the various festive foods all crammed together in the trunk as they'd listened to the carols on the radio, when that oncoming truck slipped on black ice and drove them off of the road and down the mountainside.

Christmas, coming soon again, is happy for his darling niece. For his young nephews, for the children who he helps his sister raise in their tiny apartment. They don't need to know where their father has gone —as though Lance or his sister really know either. They don't need to ever understand why Uncle Lance always looks so sad when that day comes reliably, when he contemplates just how different things might be with his mom and dad here. When he wonders how much brighter their Christmas table might look with two extra people crammed in seats that they don't have.

And his niece definitely doesn't need to know that he's wasting time thinking about this now, instead of perhaps seeing her off to the bus and counting the small amount of money that he has left in hopes that he can afford to buy her a new coat from a thrift store while she's at school.

He has work later at the convenience store, before he clocks out and makes his way to the middle school where he spends his late nights

mopping the halls. Back home by 3 AM, he'll shower, then he'll sleep, and maybe then, when he wakes up early in the morning and sees the kids off to school while his sister works, he might have a few hours to slip away and find her a new coat for Christmas.

He kisses her on both cheeks, just as the bus pulls up to the curb, crashing through slushy, gray-stained snow. This winter is endless, but his niece doesn't remember a life that isn't this eternal cold. She doesn't know what the sand in Cuba might feel like between her toes. She's never heard the ocean through more than a cheap plastic seashell.

Lance takes online classes twice a week in business and math. He thinks, with this method that's so much slower than the path taken by many of his peers, maybe by the time that he's thirty, he can introduce his family to the life that his parents always dreamed of for them.

It's better than nothing, he tells himself. It's better than giving up and not doing anything at all.

The bus pulls away, his niece waves to him happily, excitedly through the glass.

He watches as the bus lurches down the road—through the gray snow, over the gray street, through the gray fog towards gray mountains hovering far off in the distance. He watches until the dusty yellow of it fades away, until he's standing out at the mouth of a cold, gray apartment complex, hand raised and waving at empty air. His lungs collapsing with an exhaustion that he knows won't ever go away.

He tries to remember a time when he felt like the future was beautiful and full of possibilities, and for the rest of the evening, he struggles to chase that feeling.

When he was young, the world seemed hopeful and vast, an endless adventure. A collection of dreams that he only needed to grow big enough to hold onto.

But now, in the morning chill, in the empty air, in this gray place with no beaches or no shells or no waves…

He isn't so sure anymore.

Hunk is leaning against the counter at the front end of the convenience store when Lance pushes open the door. He's thumbing through a magazine that he's plucked from one of the stands, his eyes glassy and unfocused as he chews idly on a piece of gum that Lance *also* isn't too sure that he paid for either.

He raises a hand in greeting as the bells jingle, his eyes never straying from those smiling models in their bathing suits, advertising some cruise to Jamaica that both Lance and Hunk know that neither of them would ever dream of being able to afford.

"Late shift again?" Hunk asks him.

Lance sighs, long as low. He lifts the bar between himself and behind the counter, squeezing by the lighter rack and careful not to trip over any of the chewing tobacco boxes scattered behind Hunk on the floor. He pulls down the handle of the back room door, resting his head against the surface of the wood, telling himself that he isn't already tired. He can do this until the end of his shift, then he can go to his other job and not accidentally fall asleep in any of the classrooms (again) either.

"As always," he says slowly, quietly, and Hunk hums.

Lance hears him flip the page in his magazine. He knows that Hunk isn't interested in any of those girls, or those cruises, or any of the words that he's zoning out pretending to read. He knows that boredom compels the both of them to act out of character. And he knows that Hunk is tired too—of being stuck here, in this town, maybe. Of working at this dead-end job, most definitely.

But Hunk is trapped here too—by a sick mom, by a grief-stricken father. By the cage of a life built around him before he was even old enough to mess things up on his own.

Hunk is too smart for any of this. This town is a waste of his wit, of his intelligence. Of his talent.

Lance isn't sure if there's any hope for himself if there's none for someone like Hunk. The thought just depresses him, so instead, he pushes open the door and steps inside.

"You shouldn't work so hard," Hunk says over his shoulder, just a little bit louder as he hears Lance growing further away from him,

“You’re gonna look like you’re forty by the time that you’re twenty, you know?”

Lance forces a laugh that sounds just as hollow as it feels, allowing the door to swing closed behind him and end the conversation. He isn’t in the mood tonight to think about how many hours he’s wasting—how many things he’s missing from his life in hopes of providing for his growing family. He draws in a deep breath, prays to his parents surely watching over him that he can overcome this without too many gray hairs and wrinkles, and once he takes off his coat, shrugs off his bag, he shoves his things into his locker and slides his time card through the slot.

It’s the beginning of another long night, another slow, molasses week. He counts the hours and the minutes, the seconds until he’s finally free.

But it’s only the beginning hour of his shift on a Monday, and he won’t be off until Saturday. It’s only the very start of another routine, and he’s already ready to go to sleep.

Hunk is waiting for him dutifully at the counter, just where he left him, when Lance comes back out into the convenience store. He busies himself with the chewing tobacco boxes, discarding packets from the shelves that are too close to their expiration date, complaining about all of the people who buy them for having such a nasty habit. Hunk laughs at him when he says it, though he’s only half-listening.

“You should get your sister to stop smoking then,” Hunk tells him, “That’s pretty nasty too.”

Lance sighs, shoving a roll of *Skoal* into a spot that’s not quite big enough to hold it. Clicking his tongue when it pops back out and rolls across the floor under the counter.

“It’s not as nasty as chewing it.”

Hunk turns to him with a wry smile, licking his finger before turning another page of his magazine. He has to have flipped through it three times now, Lance is sure.

“No one lives forever though, Lance.” Hunk says then, and those words have a weight to them that’s far too heavy for Lance to dispute. He flicks his gaze away. “The least we can do is make sure that when we leave, it’s not our fault.”

Cirrhosis of the liver, Lance remembers. Hunk's mom has five months left to live.

The conversation ends abruptly. Lance instead chooses to fiddle with the slushie machines, even though, in this weather, he's rarely seen anyone actually use them.

The rest of his shift is slow-moving and monotonous, but somehow, Lance perseveres. They help four people for the entire evening, until Hunk leaves him just three hours before closing. He offers to stay, laughs as he says that maybe Lance will need help with the late-night rush, but inevitably, Lance shoos him away. He spends those next few silent hours taking some quizzes for class online. He studies for his next big exam in a few weeks. He likes his classes, wishes that maybe he could experience taking them face-to-face—in a big university somewhere where the sun shines for longer than just five hours per day. He thinks that his body could get acclimated to the warmth again, wonders if it's been too long though, if he'd recognize all of the sights and sounds and smells of home after he's been away for so long.

But he doesn't like thinking about it. And he definitely doesn't feel comfortable ever considering returning there without his mom and dad.

It doesn't feel right to even fantasize about it, and so, instead, he invests all thought into an essay that isn't due until next week.

The hours pass. He closes the convenience store, changes into his janitor uniform in the bathroom and shoves his convenience store clothes into his bag.

He locks up, shivers in the dark cold, and begins the short walk to the middle school.

This is his nightly routine—five days a week, sixty hours. And still, despite all of this, and his sister working her two jobs too, they can still barely make rent payments before the cutoff every month.

He wonders how he'd manage this if he were all alone.

He wonders how his sister would manage without him.

And he isn't sure how he'd feel in a life where he wasn't kept on such a short leash—in this birdcage, trapped, and never allowed to spread his wings and fly away.

The floors at the middle school seem to be forever caked in something akin to a thin layer of sludge. It takes three passes of his mop over them with bleach before he manages to get them looking just as shiny and clean as they'd looked when he left on Friday. He dumps out every classroom trash can into the bigger one on his cart, turns on the exhaust fans in the ceiling to dry the floors as he runs a squeegee over the windows. He clears the chalkboards, claps out the erasers. He cleans the filters in the fish bowls in every biology classroom, clears out the leftover food from the fridge in the teacher's break room. There are memories in these halls—of himself when he was young enough to attend. It was the first day of Christmas break when his parents passed away, and he missed the first few weeks of the Spring semester before returning as, what he would consider now, to be a changed person.

His sister had been in college then, but she'd come home as soon as she'd heard the news and never once considered going back.

She'd raised him dutifully, never letting on that giving up her dreams had bothered her. And when she'd gotten pregnant with his niece, he'd wondered why he didn't feel more angry with her—wondered why he'd never asked her how she could bring a child into this world when they could barely fend for themselves.

But family, he thinks, needs to support family. No matter what happens, no matter what they do.

He can't imagine a version of his life where he'd be able to sleep at night if he weren't supporting her too. After everything that she gave up for him, he isn't sure if he'll ever be able to pay her back.

The floors, the chalkboards, the windows and the fish bowls—everything is just as pristine as what's asked of him. After hours of tirelessly scrubbing this building, he decides that it's good enough to go home.

And he's late anyway—it's 4 AM. He's more than ready to go home and go to bed.

He opts out of changing out of his uniform, and instead puts on his coat over it, zips it up, and wraps his scarf tight around his neck. It gets colder at night, of course, and he has his suspicions that he's never been able to get used to the feeling of it completely. The building around him feels hollow and too quiet. He locks the front doors and the courtyard seems to be chittering with life.

It always spooks him out, being here when no one else is, in the dark. He feels as though he's being watched, but no matter how persistent the sensation of it is, he never has the nerve to procure his flashlight and actually investigate it.

That's how people die in scary movies, he decides. And he doesn't want to be the idiot who gets maimed by a monster just because he couldn't mind his own business.

The walk home is peaceful, serene. It's dark and cold, the road black and wet and free of the usually thin traffic that Lance has come to be familiar with in this small, nondescript town. There aren't more than a dozen cars that he sees driving through here more than once. Most visitors are seeking the lodge further up in the mountains—a popular winter vacation spot where they can skii. But he recognizes everyone else, from the convenience store or just from being another indiscernible face in this small pond of miserable people. Newcomers are uncommon. And very few people can ever dig themselves out of the holes that got them here in the first place to ever leave.

He breathes in and out, enjoying the feeling of the chill in his throat, filling his chest, filling him with something other than exhaustion and guilt, that hollowed-out anguish. The sad memories, all frozen now. He allows himself to exist separate from everything that's happened to him. He allows himself to just be, for a moment—one with the condensation of his breath in the air, one with the snow and the frost, with the black slick of the roads, with the mountains. He fools himself into thinking that the sludge beneath his feet is soft sand, and he can hear his mother calling him in for dinner some ways away. He pictures her—her bright smile, the wrinkles around her mouth and the corners of her eyes. He remembers her soft hands on his face, remembers how it felt to be held by her, to feel as though the entire world were nothing but a mother's arms encasing him.

But a single car skitters by, exhaust sputtering from the tailpipe like the whoop of a cough. He shakes his head, regains his bearings, focuses on getting home.

He imagines that some things about this place aren't too bad—like the minty fresh winter, the feeling of this crisp air filling up inside of him. The idea that during small lapses of time, there's no need to use the air conditioning in his apartment, and their bill is able to rest for a short month until the winter freezes over everything, and the heat makes that number skyrocket to ridiculous heights.

Lance thinks that having more money might solve all of his problems, but he doesn't know how he'd even go about achieving that. He's nothing but a young high school graduate—with grades that had suffered from the odd jobs that he'd picked up late in the night to help his sister raise her children. He's only been taking these two online classes for a couple of months now, and he has no sellable skills to boast about. His job experience is spotty at best—from mowing lawns to helping old ladies with their grocery shopping. To mopping the floors at the middle school to working late nights at the convenience store.

He can't imagine himself getting one of those cushy office jobs with any of this shabby, unimpressive experience under his belt. He feels, during the moments that he takes to really consider where he's ended up in life, as though he's drowning in the thick, dark river of an endless, directionless future. And he doesn't know where up is, he doesn't know which way he'd have to swim to breach the surface.

So he drowns, and drowns… and never once breathes air.

That coughing, beat up car is crawling into the parking lot when he reaches the mouth of his apartment complex. He veers closer to the snow piled in the gutter near the frozen grass, grimacing as it soaks into his pant legs, but not trusting a piece of machinery that's obviously long outlived its expiration date not to swerve over and strike him dead while he's still dressed in his work clothes. He raises his hand in a small, half-hearted welcome—never completely losing that sense of hospitality that his mother instilled in him when he was a kid, no matter how dangerous he knows that this sort of thing can be in the United States, in this small town, in a place where not everyone is as friendly or familiar as he might have been fooled into believing when he was a child.

The sky is bleak and deep and impossibly dark. The single flickering street lamp illuminates all of the scratches and dents in the paint of the old car as he tiptoes by it. And he stops to watch it drag itself finally into the parking lot, watches as it squeezes into a spot between a filthy minivan and a refurbished cop car. They've parked by the building just across from his. And he realizes, belatedly, that he doesn't recognize this car at all.

For a few weeks before this, he's noticed a small group of people moving boxes out of that building. He'd caught sight of the "for rent" sign that the landlord had dug out of storage and hammered into the frozen ground just at the threshold of the complex. He hadn't noticed

when it had gone away—might have assumed that it was blown over by the wind during a frequent snow storm, might have thought that it was mowed down by reckless teenagers in one of their cars. Might have presumed that something else had happened to it, because he couldn't have imagined that anyone was eager to move into a place like this.

Dingy and old, leaky and infested with creepy-crawlers and things that go bump in the night. Even in the brief lapse of summer, this complex is dreary and depressing enough that he himself feels as though he's living in a monochrome world.

But it appears that someone did lay claim to that newly vacant unit. He remembers how shabby theirs had looked when they'd moved into it, and he wonders if tonight is the first night that these people might be disappointed when they see it. It's a one-bedroom, if he remembers correctly from that sign. It must be a young couple trying to get on their feet. It might be a single bachelor just scraping by, or an elderly person long widowed, just trying to find a quiet place with some peace and quiet where they might be able to rest.

His sister has always laughed at him for creating entire narratives for people who he's never met. She's never understood why he's so curious about other people at all. But he wonders about this car now, why they came here. What they hope to find in this depressing place. What must have driven them here, instead of somewhere better—with their Florida plates, that he only notices when he wanders close enough, and their tinted windows, and the bumper hanging precariously from the backend of their car, as though one deep pothole might send it scraping on the highway behind them when they finally decide to get the Hell out of this horrible place.

Lance jerks forward when the front door of that car pops open. For a moment, he wonders if he should just pretend that he wasn't peeking into their windows and spying on their plates. But he pauses anyway, curious to see what the driver might look like—if he's an elderly person newly widowed, or part of a young couple, or a young bachelor, or a serial killer.

He wouldn't really be surprised by any of those choices, given what all of his other neighbors look like.

But the man who pulls himself out of the front seat is handsome. He's young, but maybe just a little bit older than Lance is. He's trim, even under a large coat. He's pale-skinned, sunless, almost—with a tightly

cut hairstyle, shaved close to the scalp just above his ears. His hair is ivory, glittering under the single street lamp. He looks like a ghost haunting this complex. He looks like an angel made of glistening white snow.

When he turns around and sends Lance a strangely friendly, warm, and *familiar* smile, Lance can't help but notice the way that the right sleeve of his sweater hangs formlessly next to him, swaying lightly in the breeze. Lance didn't know that people could drive cars with only one arm. He's never met anyone in his life who stands as tall as this man.

Under the dim street lamp, in the dark and the cold and the monochrome, the man who turns to greet him feels like sunlight radiating in all of this dreary black. He tips his head to the side, pulls that smile wide and open and unabashed.

"Good evening," he says gently, softly, drumming the knuckles of his one hand against the roof of the car, "Just getting home from work? We—we just moved in here. My… *friend* and I. I guess we'll be your new neighbors."

Lance nods, his throat feeling suddenly dry, his tongue dumb and fat and useless. The man doesn't offer him a name, but waves him off. It seems, to Lance, that he considers this encounter to be done and over, wrapped up nice and neatly with the sweet little bow of his smile.

Lance shakes his head, choking out a feeble, "Have a good night" before walking on unsteady legs towards his own apartment. When he makes it to the base of the stairs, around a corner and an adjoining wall that he can peer around without fear of this man seeing him, he places himself behind it, peeking around it as the man rounds the car in this single puddle of street light, and pulls open the back door to let someone else out.

A single bare foot pokes out. The soles are dirty, but they aren't calloused. There are no hairs that sparkle in the lamplight. There are no scars or blemishes marring that perfect, doll-like skin. And the attached leg is bare, the person seems to be entirely naked, until the man helps them out and Lance can see the puffy coat hanging all the way down to their knees—the messy mop of dark hair that seems to devour all light that hits it. The gaunt, pale skin that Lance can almost see through like wax paper, wrapped around the thin chicken bones that seem to be holding this person's entire body together.

A tiny, waifish hand holds onto the man's. The smaller, emaciated person steadies themselves, then turns, in a horrifying moment of seemingly inhuman awareness, to burn their gaze right in Lance's direction, where he should be obscured behind the brick wall that he clings to.

Those eyes, like black holes. For the mere second that they meet Lance's, Lance feels as though something deep inside of him has been ripped out. He feels winded, dizzy.

He ducks behind the wall fearfully, shaking violently from head to toe. Tears prickle at the corners of his eyes. He wills down the noisy pounding of his heart. His need to cry out. His sudden overwhelming emotions banging against the levy of his tightly-closed teeth.

It takes him entirely too long to catch his breath, to still the pounding of his heart. The last thing that he wants to do is look around that wall again. He's terrified now, and he doesn't know why. Those eyes, that porcelain doll face. Like something inhuman parading around in people's skin. Like something uncanny and too wrong, just right enough that he might have been able to ignore it if he hadn't decided to be so idiotically nosy.

With shaking hands, with a hammering heart, he looks around the wall again. Both the handsome man and that skeletal boy are completely gone. Their car sits in its spot, nondescript, innocent. Lance feels sick to his stomach.

He shakes his head. He wonders if he just encountered a cryptid, or if maybe he's just tired. He checks his watch, clicks his tongue, and drags himself up the stairs towards his apartment.

It's almost five in the morning now. Surely, he's just hallucinating because he's so exhausted. Surely, nothing weird is going on here—it's just a hot guy and his weird-looking friend. It's just an angel in the flesh carting around the second coming of Satan himself.

He's just tired, and the sun is coming up soon.

And the next morning, when he finally manages to pull himself out of bed, he peeks out of his bedroom window into the parking lot below, and the man's car is gone.

The barefoot boy, the handsome man, that feeling, as though a single look alone was all that it took to gut him.

A weird dream, a stressed dream, and dream that might mean something if he weren't still so tired.

Lance decides not to think about it. Instead, he pulls himself out of bed and goes to the kitchen to make breakfast.

Chapter End Notes

> This story was inspired by the film 'Let Me In', so if some aspects of it seem familiar to you, that's probably why!
>
> I've also had two very lovely betas for this story so far, and I really couldn't have done this without them! So thank you a thousand times over to Mai and Traffy! You guys have made my life so much easier and I owe the world! <3
>
> So this is a story that I put together for the lovely and charming epiproctan's birthday! It's been a really funny journey, creating this for her, since I had to do a lot of very sneaky sleuthing to figure out exactly what I should write that might please her the most. In all honesty, I've never delved into any sort of supernatural themes in a story before, so it's been really exciting finally exploring this particular genre! Epi isn't the biggest fan of horror, and I'm a very big lover of it, so I think we came together in a very interesting way with this project.
> So happy birthday, Epi! I love you to bits and pieces, and I really hope that this story has been, and might continue to be, something that can raise your spirits as long as it might last!
>
> For the time being, I'll be updating once every other week, but I'll let you know in advance if that schedule changes!
> Thanks so much for reading! See you again in two weeks! <3

Chapter 2

“I don’t like how friendly you are with the locals.”

The man pauses at the kitchen counter, pouring something dark and viscous from a pouch into a plastic cup with a red and yellow striped bendy straw. It’s a ridiculous motion to go through—one that at one point might have made him laugh at the pure absurdity of it all, but right now, he feels too tense. He’s tired, sore, and he just wants to finish dinner so he can go to sleep.

The light overhead is swaying back and forth. There are chitters in the walls, as though they’re alive. As though whatever lives inside of them is suddenly restless, suddenly disturbed by their presences filling this space, their voices disturbing what was once void and quiet.

“You mean how I greeted that boy? Do you think he’s already suspicious?”

The voice in the dark corner falters, pauses. For a long moment, the man thinks that the matter might be dropped. He spills a little bit of liquid over his fingers, thinks about licking it off. But he knows the taste of it will make him sick. He knows that this isn’t a delicacy that he himself could ever appreciate.

His partner would never allow it. He’d never spread this sickness further than just himself.

“Everyone is suspicious after enough time passes,” the voice tells him, “If you get too friendly too soon, people are going to start getting curious about you. You can’t act like you’re not the kind of guy that other people want to get to know.”

The man laughs, short and clipped and quiet. He walks the cup over to the corner, leaning down and handing it off to the shadows.

He jumps slightly when a tongue runs over the spilled liquid on his hand. He expects pain then, expects the prick of something needle-like puncturing his skin, but the warmth and wetness is gone quickly, replaced only by the sound of the creature tucked in the darkness devouring the contents of the cup.

It’s been a long time since they went over the conversation about table manners. He knows that it’s a lost cause.

“Don’t tell me that you’re jealous,” the man says, righting himself, smiling as color bubbles up under his skin, “Do you really think you have anything to be worried about?”

He can hear something that sounds like the click of a tongue from the black corner. He pushes out a short breath, grinning now, turning away. He knows that it’s dangerous to get his hopes up, and he knows that he’s pushing the envelope tonight, after they’ve just put such a long drive behind them.

His partner is probably tired. It’s nearly sunrise now, and they both need to sleep.

He feels guilty, somewhat, for teasing him about this now, and so, after another short moment of this stuffy silence, he adds, “You know that you’re the only one who I want.”

He can sense something shifting in the mood between them. Although he can’t see his partner’s face or his body language while he’s so obscured by the limited lighting in this kitchen, he knows that he’s struck some kind of chord.

He’d unscrewed two of the light bulbs from the mini-chandelier in the center of the room when they’d first come in. And he’d invited his partner to enter, told him, *“This is your home now. You can come and go as you please.”*

Rituals, he thinks, make this place feel more like home. Removing light bulbs, obscuring the windows, unpacking their few things… he feels more like a businessman now than whatever he really is. He feels younger and less experienced, like a college kid in his first dorm. Like a young newlywed finding comfort in whatever humble home that he can afford here.

His partner sounds petulant when he finally responds, but the man doesn’t mention it. He’s patient as he listens. He knows that it’s been a long day for both of them.

“But what if something better comes along? Something easier than this?”

The question catches him off guard. For a moment, he busies himself with being quiet, with sealing the pouch and stuffing it into their empty refrigerator. He needs to buy groceries soon—if only for himself. He needs to pretend, at the very least, that this is a normal home. That they’re normal people. He needs to get a gallon of milk to

stick in front of that dark pouch. He needs to buy a bed for the empty bedroom, if only to make it look like anyone actually sleeps in there.

Just in case anyone ever comes poking around, they need to cover their tracks. In the event that his partner is right and he has become too reckless, they need to complicate things, extend any sort of investigation, just long enough that they can disappear again.

“Why would I want anything easier than this? Do you think it would be better if it was easier, anyway? I like the excitement. I think I’d get bored staying in one place for too long.”

“You’re a liar.”

The breath feels pinned in his lungs, stale in this moldy apartment, this filthy, dusty air.

“But I’m still in love with you. I wouldn’t want anyone else.”

It’s quiet for another long moment, until the empty cup rolls across the floor. The man laughs again, scoops it up and rinses it off in the sink.

The light sways. The creatures in the walls chitter and scrape and complain.

The voice in the darkness, the shuffling of something contented stretching out and finding a comfortable position to sleep—the man listens to it, waits for further direction, waits for a reason to tell this creature why he’s chosen to follow it dutifully for so many years.

“If you try to leave me for that boy, I’ll eat him.”

The man laughs again—long and loud and unhindered.

Loud enough that the creature in the shadows complain, that the animals in the walls argue, with their shrieks and scuffles and endless, resonant groaning. Loud enough that he can hear their neighbors scrambling awake.

It’s a dark and fruitless, hopeless world, but the man laughs.

And laughs, and laughs… until things feel like they might be okay.

Lance scrubs the last of the grease and grizzle of the morning's breakfast from the plates in the sink, rinsing them one last time before placing them on the rack to dry. The sun is just starting to peek over the tops of buildings, skimming over the cement of them, sparkling in the dust particles floating in the air, against the fingerprint-smudged glass of the sliding door leading out to the balcony where his sister smokes her morning cigarette.

Lance thinks about moments like this, about what he might miss if he were ever to go away. And he wonders if secretly, she ever misses college. If she ever wonders about a version of her life where she isn't rooted here, instead of traveling out to bigger and friendlier places and thriving, instead of just existing day to day in this winter wasteland.

He knows that she wouldn't give up her family so easily. He knows that she isn't like her children's father. But he wonders, sometimes, if he knew that they'd be okay without him, would he stay? Would he really feel alright leaving this life behind, despite the melancholy, despite how much it reminds him of his parents' dead dreams, despite how desperately his heart craves for something bigger and better and *more* ?

He isn't sure. He dries his hands on the towel hanging from the handle of the oven, and he pushes open the balcony door and steps outside to join his sister.

There's a single, rickety chair that she's neglected as she leans against the safety rail. Lance sits in it carefully, righting himself as it wobbles precariously. One of the windows in the complex across from their balcony has been covered in layers and layers of newspaper. He can see the whites of it dotting with sunlight, between the rows of uniform text and the dark blobs of photographs. It wasn't like that yesterday, and he wonders if his new neighbors work nights. He wonders if they're waiting to buy blackout curtains, or if they'll keep it that way forever.

His sister seems to share his point of attention.

"That's pretty trashy," she tells him, "this whole place is trashy."

Lance spits a laugh.

“We’re here too,” he says, “what does that make us?”

She’s quiet for a moment, mouth open around the smoke that she pushes through her lips. Her fingers are pinched around the filter, nail varnish chipped and worn away. Black near the cuticles, natural, fleshy pink fading into the white tips. Lance likes it when she paints her nails freshly. It makes him feel as though she’s doing something for herself, despite how small it might seem.

He wonders, selfishly, what he ever does for himself.

“You could be more than this, you know,” she says then, filling the silence with short, clipped words and a gaze like blazing white flame at the dotted newsprint taped up in that window, “You could get out of this town, go to school… do more than take online classes. You don’t have to live and die like all of the other trash here.”

Lance draws in a deep breath. He slouches back in the rickety lawn chair, tipping his chin to the sky. He thinks about that tiny, porcelain leg and those bare feet pressing out of that car last night. He thinks about that big, handsome man and his single set of knuckles drumming against the top of his shitty car.

He wonders what a man like that has sacrificed for his family. He wonders if he’s given up any of his dreams to support the owner of those little chicken legs.

He shakes his head.

“Everything that I want is here.”

It’s a lie, but a good enough lie that his sister doesn’t argue with him. She scoffs instead, putting out her cigarette on the safety rail and tossing it over the edge into the brown-tinted snow far below.

“Mom and Dad wanted more for you.”

Words, like a pin, jammed hard and deep into the coils of his heart.

Lance flounders, catches his breath as she pulls open the sliding door and steps back inside.

He doesn’t get dressed and go buy his niece a coat. He doesn’t take a shower or wash his face. He sits in the cold in his pajamas, with bare feet, wondering about the newspaper in the window. Wondering why anyone would ever choose to come here, if they could go literally

anywhere else.

Lance runs into the handsome man two more times before the week is through.

The first time, he's taking a smoke break just outside of his apartment building when Lance returns from his second job. Lance himself is exhausted, his eyes itch, his legs feel like wet, cold noodles. They feel like the noodles that his sister used to toss from the strainer at the wall—to test if they were ready, she used to say, but she'd always forget to peel them off later. And when he got old enough to remember to do it himself, he grew familiar with the nasty texture of it. Slimy and cold like earthworms dead in slushy snow. And he feels, as he drags himself home for the night, as nothing short of forgotten pasta.

And that man, he thinks with a laugh, is the only thing in this entire dilapidated apartment complex pretty enough to peel his attention from that proverbial floral print kitchen wallpaper.

He's too tired to think of good metaphors to describe just how pretty of a man he is—the relief of his voice like waves licking shoreline. The sound of him like the warmth of a sunny home. Lance revels in the hum of his voice in this cold, stagnant silence. He jerks, just a little, when the man calls out to him as he passes, but when he takes his verbal invitation to join him for a smoke, he finds that he enjoys his company very much.

The man offers him a cigarette, and Lance feels guilty turning him down after the effort that he watched him expend in order to get it out of his coat pocket.

"Not a smoker, huh?" The man doesn't seem too phased by it. He just smiles that pretty smile, just pushes the box gently back into his coat. "You didn't have to come join me if you wanted to get home."

Lance shakes his head, leaning back against the brick foundation of this man's building. He presses the sole of one sneaker against it, rests his head against the firmness of it. He imagines that it's soft sand on the coast, that it's warm and forgiving and that when he opens his eyes, he'll be greeted by blue oceans so clear that he can almost see all of the fishes swimming around just under the surface of the waves.

Instead, he sees stars, black and endlessly deep sky, and when he turns his head to the side, he sees a smile so brilliant that it puts Cuban beaches to sorry shame.

“I wanted to get to know you,” Lance admits, and the warmth that rises to his cheeks feels better than the bite of the cold, at least, “You’re the one who put newspaper over your windows, right? My sister was pretty pissed about that.”

They both laugh, and it’s comfortable. The man pulls a small, paper packet from his pocket and places the remainder of his cigarette gently inside.

“Keith warned me that people might get mad about that,” the man says, his voice light with that laughter, his entire self seeming to open up—seeming to reveal the softness and the tender light that lies beneath that pale skin, that semi-guarded smile. All of the strange secrets already surrounding him and that other boy, only days after they’ve moved in. “He said that it looked bad and people would complain, but… I just started my new job. We have to wait until I get paid before we can buy something better.”

Lance nods, turning his face back to the sky.

“You work nights, right? Can’t fall asleep when the sun comes up?”

The man pushes out a stiff breath, shuffling in place, silent for a long moment that doesn’t feel as uncomfortable as Lance feels that it ought to.

“Something like that,” he says, and then, “I should be getting back. Have a good night.”

Lance straightens himself, swivels around and sticks out a gloved hand. The man seems surprised for a moment, jerks back as though he thinks that Lance might hit him, but he doesn’t make a move to run away.

“It’s Lance,” Lance tells him, “My name, I mean. It’s been nice talking to you.”

The man’s expression smooths out. He reaches forward and shakes Lance’s hand—awkward, Lance realizes with much self hatred, because Lance has offered him the wrong one to match the only one that he has left.

He curses inwardly, struggling to uphold his falsely confident smile.

“Shiro,” the man says, shaking Lance’s hand loosely once or twice, but holding onto his fingers longer than Lance thinks that normal people

might. As though he's considering something. As though Lance's eagerness to talk to him has him warring some kind of internal battle, "You can call me Shiro."

It's silly, and Lance is sure that he's just imagining it.

There isn't anything secretly sinister about that man's friendliness. There isn't something strange settling into the black shadows in those dark eyes.

Shiro nods to him, lets go, wanders back into his apartment.

And Lance is reminded that it's late and it's winter. He's cold and he's tired.

He should shower and sleep, no matter how suddenly invigorated he might feel.

The second time that Lance sees Shiro, it's earlier in the evening. It's Friday, and he's been granted the day off from his second job thanks to Thanksgiving break giving the students a few days off from classes. The halls should be just as pristine as he left them, the boards shouldn't need to be cleared, and the teachers fed the fish and cleaned the filters when they came in for their meetings yesterday.

Lance considers that he'll celebrate his night off by using one of the face masks that his niece bought for his birthday earlier in the year. Maybe his sister will let him drink a glass of wine with her on the balcony. Maybe he'll watch cartoons with the kids.

He's trudging through a freshly fallen patch of snow, dragging himself with slightly more energy than usual back to his apartment. This time, Shiro isn't smoking or leaning against the wall outside of his building. This time, he's rushing by so quickly that he nearly runs into Lance in his haste.

"H-hey, hey, are you okay?" Shiro turns to him with a borderline manic look in his eyes. His cheeks are hollowed out, shadowed in the setting sun and bathed in a red glow emanating from the scarlet clouds and the orange-cast sky above them. Shiro's face is dotted with something dark, and he stinks of something that Lance can't put his finger on right away—something that reminds him of cleaning out the trash in the zoology classroom after dissection days. Something heady and thick, metallic in the back of his throat that causes him to take a jerky step back, to choke as bile roils in the depths of his belly.

Shiro pales somehow even further, his brows knitting together, the tension only slightly ebbing away from his features, but not his shoulders, which are hunched where he's barely managed to grasp a black garbage bag packed with something leaking in his fist, slung over his back.

"Oh hey, uh… Lance." Shiro's smile is artificial. It's bent strangely at the edges, and it doesn't meet his eyes. Lance feels something sickening wrenching around in his belly, a coldness striking heavy through his veins. Suddenly, Lance realizes that he doesn't want to continue this conversation, but he's stuck now, barely resisting the urge to cover his nose with his hand to mute that awful smell, barely stopping himself from asking what that dark liquid is splattered across Shiro's chiseled jawline, and leaking from the holes in the trash bag. "I'm a little busy tonight, I'm sorry, but we'll talk later, okay? It was nice seeing you."

It's not the least suspicious greeting in the world, but Lance decides that he'd rather mind his own business. He'd rather not be the witness who gets kidnapped and tortured and dumped in some remote landfill later on, just because he asked too many questions and got too close to some dangerous conspiracy.

It's a sorry few steps away from "I have to return some video tapes" in this day and age, and Shiro is dashing back towards his apartment quicker than Lance thinks that someone who were totally innocent and up to nothing suspicious might, but…

He drops it. He pretends that it didn't happen, and he shakes his head, breathes the breath trapped in his lungs, and decides that instead, he'll celebrate his night off first by taking a nice, hot shower.

He feels, for the rest of the evening, as though the smell of whatever Shiro was carrying over his back is trapped in the back of his throat.

He feels like, every time that he looks in the mirror, there's an imaginary dotting of something dark speckled over his skin.

Like bugs crawling with many tiny legs just under the surface of his clothes, the stink of Shiro's secret, that nefarious aura that he'd trailed in the snowy footsteps behind him—Lance feels as though, somehow, he's been marked by it too.

But the days pass, that moment feels more like a strange hallucination, and a week later, Lance makes another friend in the snowy courtyard who proves, without even trying, to be somehow even more off-

putting than Shiro is.

It's another nondescript early-morning-slash-late-late-night, at first. It's a total of fifteen days after Lance originally noticed Shiro and his strange "friend" moving into the complex. He's trudging home just as more snow begins to fall. He wonders if the news tomorrow will report that his sister's kids have school off for the day—if maybe he'll be allowed to take tomorrow evening off because of the amount of snowfall that they get and the quickly plummeting windchill, and if perhaps his weekend will start early. It isn't falling too heavily tonight, and it doesn't seem as though it's going to be a terribly thick storm, but it's close enough to winter break now that he wonders if perhaps the school board will give the students a few extra days off just to liven their spirits before they don't have to deal with them for awhile.

It'll be difficult though—to take care of his niece and nephews during the day when he should be resting. And at night, when his sister comes home from her own double shifts, he knows that she'll be exhausted while trying to convince the kids to go to bed at the same time as they regularly would on any normal school night.

The school board, he thinks, has no regard for overworked parents. They don't seem to realize that some families just don't have the resources to watch their children when school isn't a viable option.

But, even still, he's excited for his young relatives. He knows that surprise days off are few and far between in a town such as this, where it always snows, when the summers are so bland and tepid that a heat warning wouldn't be realistic. He knows that it might be the highlight of their winter, if they're able to spend even one day relaxing instead of waking up early for the bus.

So he's conflicted, and he decides that no matter what happens, he's going to be somewhat pleased with the outcome, albeit somewhat inconvenienced as well.

As he enters his complex, he kicks his feet through growing piles of snow. He doesn't mind the cold of it melting into his pant legs tonight, doesn't notice the clammy sensation of it as he's locked in such an intense mental battle, going over all of the pros and cons of snow days and nights off of work, having to make extra time when he should be sleeping to conjure up lunch and dinner for the kids before he leaves for his shift at the convenience store.

There's a slow creaking ringing through the air, cracking through the silence in gradual intervals that grows louder with every step that he takes towards his building.

He wonders if the wind is pushing the playground equipment around again. It's a small space just beyond the parking lot—a tetanus accident just waiting to happen, his sister has always said. One of the other children in the complex had fallen off of one of the swings when the rusted chains had snapped from the bar just a few years ago, and since then, none of the parents in the complex have allowed their kids to go close to it. It's devolved since into further disrepair without frequent use to wipe the moisture from the joints of the metal, rusted further, been buried in such a thick layer of dirt and snow and slick ice that it's now virtually uninhabitable.

The skeletal fallen soldier of the swing set still stands at the furthest end of the tiny, dilapidated playground. A few feet away, there's a metal pony on a spring that's rusted so terribly that it won't even bend back and forth like it's supposed to. Its face, petrified in ice in that shrieking, paint-faded expression of agony that always manages to freak Lance out if he gazes at it for too long. And in the shadows under the flickering street lamps, its hollow eyes seem to follow him no matter how far away and in which direction he walks.

And slightly further away, there's a merry-go-round—the only centerpiece to this sorry sight of a playground that's even remotely functioning anymore.

When his eyes finally settle on it, as he's passing through the center of the parking lot towards his building, he feels an eerie chill run through him at the sight of someone or… *something* sitting on the snowy surface of it, pushing it around with one foot on the ground, one tucked up underneath them. They're nothing but a black blob in the dim light, so motionless that the subtle movement of the merry-go-round back and forth seems like it's a rigged animatronic glitching in some pre-programmed motion that it should be making instead. There's something inhuman about the whole thing—the stillness of this person, the darkness, and the shrill squeals of the metal grating against ice and rust, crying out in some pitiful, desperate semblance of a warning that makes the hair on the back of Lance's neck stand on end. Lance is frozen now, a deer gazing into the quickly-nearing headlights of an oncoming car. He's staring at the shadow of this person who, he realizes with a tight squeeze in his chest, he can't even tell if they can see him or not.

He shallows, thick and heavy and hard. He's pinned by the sight of this person who he doesn't even know with certainty is watching him. He doesn't know if they've noticed him yet at all. But he feels as though there are eyes all around him in the courtyard now, as though he's in the belly of a vast crowd, and the tiny hints of sounds around him—the crowing of a raven somewhere in hollow dark, the crunching of snow under his shoes, they're amplified, booming. They're deafening, and he's hyper-aware of them. Of the blood rushing in his veins. Of the balmy warmth of his own sweat collecting under his coat collar. Of how easily his feeble life force could be snapped apart, like a twig cracking under his foot. If only, he thinks, a person were dangerous or determined enough.

If only a person were as wild as Shiro had looked in passing just days ago.

He's stranded under the lamp light, shivering in the cold, sore around his tired eyes.

And a voice, a clear crack of vocal chords seemingly unpracticed, it calls out to him softly.

"Do you need something?"

Lance steels himself, wills himself to stay rooted, as a violent tremor works its way through him.

"I—I'm sorry, I'm, uh… It's like two in the morning, dude. Shouldn't you be like… inside? Like not… not out in the cold?"

He realizes that he should have had more tact. He realizes that maybe this would go over better if maybe he'd asked if this person needed any help instead.

But it's too late now, and that voice has quieted abruptly, like wet fingers smothering a candle flame. In silence, he stands still and the figure continues to jerk the merry-go-round back and forth, and even though he knows that it's insane—

Even though he realizes how weird he must look and how dangerous this might be and how bizarre he must be acting when this person obviously wants to be left alone, he can't stop himself from stepping forward.

He takes a few short steps, leans down and wipes the snow away from a spot on the merry-go-round that's only a few bars away from the

shadowed stranger. They don't move an inch, don't seem to even register that he's drawn closer to them, and something about it feels off. Something about this feels as though he's a fly wandering entirely too close to a spider's web, and the spider is watching him, waiting for the right chance to strike.

And it's only exacerbated by the fact that he can't sense the warmth or the presence of the person sitting next to him. It's as though they're a mannequin, as though he might reach out and touch them and realize that they truly are just a machine placed here to confuse the few fools naive enough to actually have a conversation with it.

But, for now, he sits down. And he allows the silence to wrap around him with the cold. He breathes in deeply, clutches his gloved hands together in his lap and leans to the side to brace himself against one of the merry-go-round's frozen bars. He can feel the ice under his backside already melting and sticking cold and uncomfortably to the seat of his pants. The snow in the parking lot continues to fall quietly. He imagines, again, that it's sand piled up in fallen castles on the beach. He convinces himself that the warmth of his coat is the summer sun beating down on his back.

The thing sitting next to him stays quiet. It doesn't move an inch. And suddenly, he wonders why his mind has decided that whoever this is, they can't possibly be human.

He isn't superstitious. He doesn't believe in ghosts or monsters. He doesn't understand why he's so strangely comfortable with the idea that he's not talking to a human but a *thing* .

"It's chilly tonight." He says, and his voice doesn't really sound like his own. It's too practiced and careful. He isn't sure if he's making conversation or just prolonging his own inevitable demise. He doesn't know why he's been so drawn here when every warning bell in his head is blaring at top volume, all at once. "I wonder if they'll call off school tomorrow."

The shadow next to him doesn't respond, and when he peers over to make sure that they're still there, they're still real, and he isn't just imagining this, he notices, in a flicker of dying light, that they aren't wearing any shoes.

Pieces of slushy snow cling to their translucent skin, but the legs look fuller, less bony and more muscular than he remembers watching poke out of the backseat of that car just weeks ago. He tries to

remember what he learned in his high school nutrition class about weight gain, but it doesn't seem possible to him that a person could bulk up in such a limited amount of days.

The toes and the pads of the feet that he can see are still dirty. It seems to him as though this person hasn't worn shoes outside in a very long time. To their knees, he can see the same puffy coat that he remembers spotting from behind the wall. And the hair is still a tangled, overgrown mess. The nape of it hangs long below their ears, disappears into the collar of the coat and shines in the light in a brassy sort of way that makes him wonder how long it's been since they washed it.

Like a corpse, Lance thinks. Like a corpse preserved in ice. He wonders if he's stumbled into some kind of zombie movie. He wonders if this person has been rotting from the inside out for a very long time.

It might explain why he'd moved out here to snow-filled Hell. It might explain why he's so careful not to wear more layers than he has to, when he's trying not to smell too bad.

But those dark eyes turn to him, suddenly. And in a flash of street lamp light, Lance meets the gaze of a face so beautiful that he feels as though it must somehow be unholy.

If he had a rosary, he thinks that now, he'd be clutching it. He's never been particularly religious, but the face of this corpse-person, of this ghost, of this monster, it seems too good, too pretty, too *perfect* to even be real.

The slopes of his high cheekbones are obscured in shadow. Those dark eyes, like black holes drawing Lance further in, they're lit by flecks of a lighter blue that Lance wonders what they might look like in brighter light. He imagines that they'd be beautiful, just like this boy. He imagines that they'd be like amethyst, with dots of sparkling, lighter blue dotting them like stars in an endless night sky. With deeper purple hues buried in the shadows of them. And something strange and otherworldly resting somewhere deeper, something so sure and so calculated, as though just this single, short look at this ostentatiously peculiar boy could possibly convince Lance that he knows just about everything that there is to know about the universe and every single person who inhabits it.

Full, pale lips. Thin, white skin. His face is framed nicely by overgrown, shaggy hair. His thick eyebrows are drawn low and

knitted together. When he opens his mouth, Lance can't help but flick his gaze to the light bouncing off of perfect, straight white teeth.

"You need to go home right now."

There's an urgency to those words—in that gruff voice, in the smooth way that the words slide from his tongue as though he doesn't need to move his mouth to communicate at all. Everything about this interaction feels rehearsed somehow, feels like deja vu, feels like this stranger somehow already knows what's going to happen before Lance even moves an inch. And everything about this boy is intoxicating, hard to ignore. Difficult to stay away from, no matter how painfully his heart is fluttering in fear in his chest. Lance finds that, if this person were to ask him to do anything, it might be near impossible to actually refuse him.

So Lance rises from his seated position, quick and jerky like a marionette on strings. He clears his throat, turns his eyes to the flickering street lamp, grapples with his jumbled thoughts to compile them into a coherent goodbye.

But when he turns to say goodnight to this strange, beautiful, *inhuman* boy…

He's gone.

And Lance is alone with his thoughts, his tapered breaths, and the snow still falling slowly and silently all around him.

Curiously enough, when he takes a single moment to look at the spot where the boy was perched, none of the snow or ice where he'd been sitting is melted at all.

Chapter 3

As it turns out, adhesive "blackout" paper for the windows only costs a little over ten dollars for a roll. The man pretends that he'd figured that out all on his own when he tells his partner, when he brings the bundle of it home one evening just as his partner is stumbling half asleep out of the bathroom, rubbing tiredly at his eyes.

He neglects to mention that he'd followed the advice that Lance had given him—after he'd complained just a few nights ago during their now-frequent after work smoke breaks that the landlord had called and instructed for him to figure something else out. Too many people had complained.

Lance had laughed and apologized when he'd mentioned it, reasoned that his own sister was probably responsible for about half of those angry phone calls.

"There's a home repair store about three blocks from here," Lance had told him then, *"Right next to the diner with the big neon cow sign. You can't miss it. Anyway, just go there and ask them about blocking out windows. They have this paper stuff there. They used it for one of the biology classrooms at the middle school one time. I guess they were growing mushrooms or something, I don't know. But it seemed like it did a pretty good job."*

His partner hasn't seemed suspicious so far, or, at the very least, if he is, he's done an amazing job of hiding it. The man chalks this one up to a win—but then he doesn't really understand what he's winning, or when any of this became a game. His partner knows that he talks to Lance. He knows that he's made a few acquaintances at his new job, talked to some locals, been just as friendly and welcoming as what's required of him, in order to seem inconspicuous in this small town.

There isn't a reason why he should feel as though talking to Lance, too, as one of the only people so far who's witnessed the more suspicious things about him—why that should feel as though he's betraying his partner's trust somehow.

He doesn't like feeling as though he's sneaking around. As though he's keeping secrets.

But his partner seems content to tuck himself against the wall and just watch, without question. He doesn't seem like he's wanting to start

any trouble tonight, or as though he's in a particularly sour mood and he's just looking for a good excuse to start a fight.

So the man decides to drop it for now. He unpacks his few groceries, cuts the adhesive paper from its package, and reads through the instructions. And time passes, as the sun sets fully just outside of the windows.

His partner watches him from the darkness. He begins tugging the newspaper free of the glass.

And then, suddenly:

"Do I seem young to you?"

The man stops moving for a moment, fingers poised over the paper that he's slowly peeling from the corners of every window. It's taped together in a crude version of papier-mâché, layered thick enough that no light can permeate the surface of it even as their window faces the east. But it's dark now—late enough in the night that his partner has been awake for a few hours watching him work, that he drank the last of the liquid that they'd had saved for him in the fridge with a disappointed grimace at the stale flavor of it, and has now banished himself back to his shadowy corner—in lower spirits than he'd seemed just a little bit earlier.

And now, the man knows with absolute certainty that he doesn't want to spoil his bad mood even further by mentioning anything to do with Lance.

He's been in sour spirits since then, and the man can't say that he really blames him. He understands that the nutritional value of the liquid decreases with its age. He understands that it must feel as though his partner is surviving only on the barest of rations, but lately, in such a small town, finding meals at mere opportunity has been vastly more difficult than when they'd taken cover in bigger cities.

He peels the paper completely away from the window, discarding it behind him on the floor. The echo of it tearing away reverberates through the empty room. The man wonders if it's even worth getting thrift store furniture this time. Life in this place, he's realizing gradually, doesn't seem viable.

"You seem as young as you look."

He turns his head to mask his smile when his partner scoffs. He knows that no one could ever guess his age accurately, that no one could ever comprehend the amount of time that he's wandered this earth when gazing at such a pristine, unmarked face. It would be impossible to decipher an accurate number for him—from his appearance, his behavior. He's been encapsulated in this phase of his life for longer than even the man himself truly knows.

He doesn't know why his partner is suddenly so curious about it, but as he pulls a packet of window adhesive from the plastic, he wonders if maybe it has anything to do with the amount of people who appear to be his partner's age wandering around this small town in varying numbers, blithe and carefree and full of so much potential and possibility.

Maybe he's seen the youths spending their weekends kicking through graying bales of snow. Maybe he's heard them drunkenly laughing, returning home on their late nights from bars and clubs, full of excitement and a zest for life that he surely hasn't felt in decades.

Or maybe he's thinking, again, about the boy who Shiro can't seem to stay away from—with his bright, kind eyes and his soothing smile. With the open, honest way that he carries himself, as though every stranger in the world is just a friend who he hasn't been fortunate enough to get to know.

The man doesn't mind secrets. He lives in them, thrives and survives because of them.

But sometimes, he thinks, it's nice to meet someone who just says what they think, who wears their emotions on their sleeve, and doesn't seem more complicated than just a normal young man living in a constant state of confusion while his neighbors are so achingly strange and discomforting.

"Why are you asking about this?" He takes a gamble. His partner is already in a bad mood, he decides. It wouldn't hurt to at least try to have this conversation, even if it might end in the further deterioration of their already tempestuous relationship. "Did someone say something to you?"

There's silence for a long stretch of time. He can hear the creatures in the walls still scurrying, can hear their neighbors shuffling about through the adjoining wall, getting ready for bed.

"That boy that you like," his partner tells him slowly, carefully, as

though he's choosing his words precisely in the interest of not giving too much away, or not eliciting the *wrong* kind of conversation, "He told me that school might be called off the other day. I don't understand why he'd say that to me. Why would I care about school?"

The man feels guilty for how terrified that statement makes him feel. He feels as though he should have more faith in his partner not to make any terrible mistakes.

But he turns, gradually, his voice pinned deep in his throat. His hands tremble against the adhesive paper as his pulse ricochets within his chest.

"Y—you talked to him? To Lance?"

The shadows offer him nothing but silence. There's no indication of a threat, of ill-will, of a promise to leave even just one person out of this. To spare even a single life, or to take one out of pettiness, or anger, or jealousy.

It's the mystery of his partner's intentions that stills the blood in his veins. It's being so unsure of why his partner would make such an effort to seek out that boy and apparently not to kill him, that makes him feel sick. It's terrifying, and it feels so dreadfully unfair.

He's conflicted, torn between this new friendship and a love that he's chased desperately for so many years.

He doesn't know what to do now—if he should tell his partner to leave it alone. If he should leave himself. If he should warn the boy somehow to protect himself and his family—all of those small children who the man has seen him leading like a mother hen to the bus stop in the mornings, and the older woman who smokes on the balcony every morning and every late night.

The man doesn't like that he's made attachments here. He doesn't like how easily his partner could sever them.

And he doesn't like that suddenly, like the flip of a switch, he's changed sides. No longer is he willing to do anything to continue this lifestyle. No longer is it just the two of them against the entire world.

"Keith, leave him alone."

The dark and the quiet, the scurrying in the walls. They offer him nothing. It's quiet—no breath or pulse. No argument. No reassurance.

The man, finished with the windows in the living room, collects his things and shoves his way into the bathroom. He peels away the old paper, hangs up this new, thick black adhesive that might look more acceptable to the neighbors.

He doesn't say anything to his partner while he's inside. He feels too guilty to further reprimand him, feels too terrified to ask him what he's planning to do.

It takes a long time to replace the newspaper in the bathroom, as the tape seems to have melted in the shower steam. It stretches out and tears too often while he's attempting to pull it off, and a substantial amount of time passes with the discomfort of his warning to Keith still wedged between them.

In time, just before he's finished, the guilt overpowers his fear. He knows that he needs to have faith in his partner. He knows that, at the end of this century, it might just be the two of them, still together. There isn't any good reason to get hung up on humans who won't be around for very long.

So he manages to hang the adhesive, then he makes his way back into the living room to apologize.

But his breath stills, his heart hammers violently in his chest.

There's no one in the living room, the empty bedroom, the doorway where he's left his shoes. There's no one hiding in the shadows, no voice that answers to his calls. No one, but himself, pacing through this dark apartment in a desperate search for a hungry, frustrated, and *dangerous* boy.

He tears into the kitchen, calls out his partner's name a final time.

And all of the newspaper on a window in the corner has been torn open, the latch pushed up, the screen shoved out.

It's open, beckoning in the night. Letting in the cold, winter air.

Lance wonders if his life might be a lot less stressful if he'd taken up smoking a long time ago. He thinks about all of the nice extra breaks

that he might be allowed to take at the convenience store. He thinks about how serene his sister looks in the morning with a cigarette pinched between her fingers. He thinks that, at the very least, when he'd walked into the middle school for his shift earlier in the evening and found that the floors were somehow even more filthy than usual, maybe he would have had something to look forward to in order to reward himself for the extra two hours that he'd had to spend scraping the grime of salt and melted mud from the linoleum, instead of the disappointing promise of a lumpy mattress and thin, scratchy old comforter being his only sultry mistress to come home to.

But he'd made it through, and he'd considered that maybe he could write some kind of notice to the school, some kind of complaint to the staff that might change things. But then he isn't sure what complaint he could even cite— that the students have to take off their shoes before they come inside? That the students aren't allowed to be muddy or caked in snow, or they need to go home and put on different clothes?

Of course, he could see that going over very well with the school board and the PTA. He's sure that they wouldn't sooner sack him than even humor the mere *idea* of taking his tired, overworked pleas into consideration.

He knows that he's being unreasonable, but his boss isn't going to be pleased about the overtime. Especially without notice. Especially since, on paper, tonight must have looked like a completely normal night.

He drags himself back to his apartment. It's a ten minute walk, but it's colder tonight than it has been prior. Gradually, it's nearing Christmas again, and the temperature is delving closer and closer to the negatives. The sun is setting earlier and earlier every evening into the deep black of depressive, endless snowy night.

He's tired enough at 5 AM that he could reasonably imagine himself laying down in the snow piled up in the street's gutters and just giving up. He could exist in that cold and wrap himself up in the sheets of ice. He could imagine that he wasn't freezing to death, like that strange boy on the merry-go-round. He could tell himself that maybe, with enough mental strength, he might be able to ignore it, thrive in it, even, and just get his few precious hours of rest here on a single silent road, until the morning traffic might rouse him just before he's too late to get home to make breakfast.

He feels more on edge lately than he has in a long time. He feels as though the leash that he's tethered to is suddenly frightfully short.

But he isn't sure what he can do to remedy it, except for just continuing to charge forward, to live through it, and to simply accept that maybe his entire life for the rest of his numbered days will be these long shifts, the occasional agonizing mess at the middle school, and a schedule that never gets more lax, no matter how many inconveniences throw themselves in his path.

It's not a particularly proud life. It isn't exactly what he'd imagine that his parents dreamed up for him when they were collecting all of their belongings and applying for their work visas, uprooting and moving their entire growing family to this new country with its supposed opportunities. Saying goodbye to everyone who they'd ever known, and accepting the fact that this dreary winter was just a single downside to the decent factory job that his father had managed to land that brought them here in the first place.

But that's beside the point, and he's growing more and more concerned by the sheer amount of times that he's been dwelling on the past lately. His sister seems to have noticed his more sullen mood as well. She's suggested saving up some money and sending him to "talk to someone", but Lance knows that no amount of extra work could give them the proper cash to afford something like that.

And even if they could manage to wrangle up the funds for a shrink, he can think of a dozen other things that they'd need the money for that would benefit the entire family, instead of just himself.

Like a new coat for his niece, or a couch that isn't lumpy with springs stabbing up any time that someone sits in it the wrong way. Or even more groceries, Christmas presents for the kids, or any number of things that Lance imagines must be more pertinent to their day to day life than dumping a small fortune into remedying a fleeting low mood.

He'd reassured her that he was okay. He might have just been getting sick. He's probably just been tired. Maybe he needs to invest a much smaller amount of money into buying himself a sun lamp—for seasonal depression, he'd told her. For something that wouldn't last longer than the weeks between now and the first warm day of spring.

She hadn't really believed him, but she'd dropped it. For the time being, at the very least. Lance had sworn to himself that later on, he'd do a better job of hiding it.

She has too many things to stress out about already, he reasons, and he definitely shouldn't be one of them.

So he trudges home through the snow, in the same gray, cold weather, in the same endless black night. The clouds tonight have obscured the moon and the stars, and it's difficult to navigate his way home with so many of the street lamps having flickered out one by one in the last couple of weeks.

He'd read an article in the newspaper this morning about how the bulbs had been smashed. He'd laughed with his sister about the sorry schmuck who'd had to climb up the poles to take pictures of the shattered glass still clinging, frozen now, to the screws and the rusted threads. They'd wondered if it was neighborhood kids tossing rocks at them in their boredom, or if perhaps the city had truly been cheap enough that they'd invested in a few dozen outdated and explosive bulbs.

It could be anything, Lance thinks, but the night feels more alive now when it's darker. It feels more like the courtyard just outside of the middle school—as though a thousand tiny eyes are watching him, but himself, blind and acclimated only to the bright sun and the warm, salty breeze of a far away home, is too dulled and dumb to see anything but ever-present, humming black.

He feels another tremor inching up his spine. He doesn't like thinking about being watched one bit. Especially as of late—since meeting the other mysterious neighbor just a few days ago on that merry-go-round in the courtyard. Since unraveling the mystery of those two even further, and leaving that whole terrifying encounter with more questions than he could ever hope to find the answers to.

But now he's nearing the complex again. And in the street light, under the final bulb left intact in their parking lot, he sees a darkened figure standing still. As though presented under a single spotlight, as though on display here in front of his audience of one, the figure is encased in a halo of flickering yellow. All around them, he can see the snow falling gently through the air, cling to their hair and skin and never melting. Piled up over their bare legs, still not trembling under just that oversized, filthy coat.

His blood freezes over. His pulse climbs up into his throat. He's rooted and useless. His limbs feel as though they've been patched over in unyielding stone.

He can't see the details of this person with the light beating down against their back. But somehow, without even a doubt or a second thought, he knows exactly who it is.

He can feel those eyes watching him, waiting. Calculating how long it might take for either of them to bridge the few yards thick between them. For Lance to turn around and run away, if only his useless legs would listen to his screaming brain.

He feels as though he might piss his pants.

But thankfully, in his fright, it seems that even his bladder is refusing to work right away.

Moments that feel like multiple eternities pass between them. Lance, frozen over, the strange, horrifying boy, unnaturally still.

He swallows, jerks just a little to test himself. And when he can move, he realizes that he doesn't know where he wants to go—back out through the mouth of the complex into a night with nothing to offer him, or further in, into the web with that awaiting spider, with its beautiful, haunting eyes and that paper-thin skin.

So he moves forward, compelled as though there's a string in his chest that the boy is tugging closer and closer. He kicks through the snow, his heart pounding, deafening in his ears. He feels as though there are no sensations that could ever be as overpowering as the feeling of his blood working through his veins. And he doesn't know why he's so hyper focused on it. He doesn't know why, suddenly, he feels more like a meal than a living, feeling person.

He thinks that he might just be watching too many horror movies. He needs to stop turning on the TV late at night just before he goes to bed.

When he steps over the threshold of the dark into that patch of lamp light—close enough that he can barely make out the boy's features in the dark, that he could reach out and brush the still-frozen snow from the boys shoulders if he were brave or stupid enough, he stops. And he's rooted again, desperate and stupid and completely unsure. He doesn't know if he wants to talk. He doesn't know what led him here, or what he could possibly want from this terrifying person.

And the boy watches him silently, unmoving and still obscured by the dark. His hands are shoved in his pockets. His bare legs are piled to the calves with growing piles of unmelting snow.

Lance doesn't know why it's not melting. Lance doesn't know how he's not cold.

And he doesn't know why he says what he says next, but something about the sight of the boys eyes—red rimmed, tired. His mouth jutting out, his cheeks hollow and colorless, his shoulders sagging—it tugs at his heart strings. It kicks his maternal instinct into overdrive.

He says, stupidly, "You look really cold out here. Do you wanna come inside and warm up?"

He's never had much tact when it comes to first dates or picking up prospective partners. And he isn't even sure why that thought is crossing his mind right now.

The boy raises both eyebrows, leans back onto his heels and sucks in one side of his cheek.

"I don't get cold," he says, flat and blunt, devoid of any inflection that might allude to an emotional response to Lance's inappropriate question, "Do you usually invite half-naked strangers into your apartment? With all of those kids in there?"

Lance isn't particularly fond of this conversation, suddenly. He didn't know going into this that his moral compass and general lack of good judgement was going to be called into question, especially by a guy who never seems to wash his hair and spends his early morning hours hanging out in a rusty, old playground with no pants on.

"H-hey, okay, I was—I was just trying to be nice, alright?! You don't have to be a dick about it! I just thought… I thought you looked upset or something, sorry for caring!"

His fists are balled up at his sides, his cheeks white hot. He's trembling slightly, suddenly not from fear—suddenly *fearless* , even, in the face of such audacity coming from one of the two people in this entire complex who have ever scared him absolutely shitless. He feels almost more offended that a guy like this has managed to embarrass him too, as though he hasn't negatively affected Lance's mental state to the highest capacity thus far. As though he truly must be determined to deplete Lance's already frightfully low reserve of energy, just by freaking him out so much that his sleep has suffered, he's been less focused and far less aware of his surroundings. And then, once his defenses are lowered and he's already so terrified, sucker-punching him with this sudden dry sarcasm, when he really thought that he might die here instead.

Flustered, Lance nearly trips over his feet when he tries to storm away. And in a flash faster than his eyes can register, just before he falls, there's a small, white hand darting out and catching him in a stony grip by the bend of his arm.

"You need to be more careful."

Lance wrenches his arm away, his heart fluttering desperately, his skin so warm now that he feels as though he might melt all of the snow within a two mile radius.

"W-well you—you need to stop being so weird, okay?! How do you even know that I have kids in my apartment?! Have you been watching me?!"

There's something about the twitch of the boys lips upward that seems as though he might want to laugh. He crosses his arms over his chest, taking one single step forward with those bare feet in the snow. Lance jerks just a little bit further back, raising his hands in front of him in a pathetic excuse of a defensive position.

"Shiro told me." The boy tells him, and the corners of his teeth peeking through that snotty little smirk are just a little bit too angular for Lance's liking. He wonders, fretfully, if maybe it's just a trick of the light. "He said that you take all of them to the bus stop every morning, but someone else picks them up at night. Is it your girlfriend? Your wife—"

"My sister." Lance chooses a more defiant stance, mirroring the boy almost perfectly with his own arms now crossed over his chest. He rests most of his weight against one leg, propping the other one out somewhat, peacocking a sense of ease in this conversation that he definitely doesn't feel. "And what about you, huh? Shiro's your husband, your brother—"

"Just a *friend* ."

There's a needle's edge to those words, and Lance immediately feels as though he's touched a white hot flame. As though he's trekked into dangerous territory, and there's nothing that he can do to remedy this conversation now that he's ruined it. He resists the urge to jerk even further away, resists the urge to apologize when this conversation wouldn't feel quite as critical if he were having it with literally anyone else.

He feels, suddenly, as though he's pretending to be bigger than he

really is. As though he's trying to scare a grizzly bear away from his picnic. But the boy isn't budging like some dopey, lost bear. The boy doesn't seem even remotely impressed or intimidated by the fact that Lance is trying very hard to pretend that he isn't afraid of him.

But he does look agitated suddenly, and Lance wonders if maybe he misstepped, and if maybe his accidental rudeness might cost him more than this potential friendship with a guy who he isn't even sure if he likes or not.

Lance clears his throat, untucking his arms from against his chest and rubbing his hands together to create some heat under his gloves. He spares a look out into the darkened parking lot, feeling suddenly very nervous as the bulb above them flashes, blinks, and jitters as though it might die out any second now.

He doesn't want to be alone in the dark with this boy. He doesn't feel as though he'd ever live to make it home if he were.

And knowing this, he isn't sure why he doesn't just leave now—leave this boy to sulk in the cold and the snow. Leave this scene behind and promise himself that he'll come home earlier every night somehow. He'll live a more private life. He'll stay safe long enough to see the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel that he's still trapped in here.

"I guess you're not gonna take me up on my offer, so—"

"I will," the boy says, rushed but even, perhaps even *eager* , if only Lance could discern any real emotion in his tone, "Not tonight, but… if you ask me again another time… I will."

Lance almost laughs at how bizarre that sounds, turns back around to tell this boy just how strange of a thing that is to say—but under the flickering street lamp, leaving no indication of his presence here but footprints in the snow—

For the second time, he's left Lance abruptly alone, and Lance flounders then, chokes on the spit in his throat, on his own shock and mortification.

He wonders if this is all in his head. He wonders if he's finally went off the deep end.

But he goes home eventually, showers, and tucks himself into bed just as the sun is peeking through the black clouds in the sky.

For whatever reason, he thinks to himself, *'Oh, of course he couldn't come over tonight. The sun was about to rise.'*

But he doesn't know why he thinks it. And he doesn't like this new series of observations that he's caught himself making—as though his body senses something about this entire outlandish ordeal that his brain is just a little bit slower picking up on.

His instincts are keen apparently, but he ignores them.

There's nothing otherworldly about that boy.

He isn't dangerous.

Lance decides that he's just tired.

"He was out again tonight."

The man jerks his head to the side, his heart thumping hard in his rib cage as he allows those words to bleed into his tired thoughts.

He's finished hanging almost all of the blackout adhesive, but left the torn newspaper covering the open window in the kitchen intact just in case his partner decided to return the way that he left. He's collecting the small amount of trash that they've accumulated in their brief stay here, tossing it into a trash can without a liner, and taking a long, steadying breath before he turns and faces the shadowed figure in the dark corner of the kitchen.

He's relieved, once his eyes adjust to the darkness, to see no indication of blood. The copper of it doesn't fill the air. The bite of it doesn't tickle at the back of his throat. He allows himself to be lulled into a sense of security by this discovery alone, feeling foolish for being so distrustful of his partner when he knows that many times, it isn't so easy to resist the urge to feed when he becomes hungry enough. Feeling suddenly guilty, for pitting his partner against this stranger, as though it's fair—as though he deserves either of them when he's been so determined that he has the right to choose *between them* all this time.

As though he deserves to consider himself higher or mightier than his partner, when there's just as much blood on his own hands.

He shakes his head, taking another deep breath before curling his lips upward in a gentle, deceitful smile. There's a storm roiling inside of him now, a tremor of guilt and fear and confusion, and he hopes that his partner doesn't sense his sudden indecision. He hopes that, somehow, someday they can move away from this place and leave no loose ends behind.

He isn't sure if finding his partner caked in blood would have been better or not, for this end. He isn't sure if the emotional toll of something like that would be worth knowing that he wouldn't ever have to question the ifs or buts of what might have happened if he'd run off with a dead man instead of staying here.

"Did you talk to him?"

His partner looks away, crossing his arms over his chest. He taps one foot against the floor in a short display of his nerves, and if the man focuses hard enough, he imagines that he might see him biting his bottom lip.

"He talks a lot," his partner says, "and he's weird."

The man laughs.

"We're also weird."

His partner sends him a hot look, moving forward from the shadows into the dim light between them.

"He invited me back to his apartment. He said that I looked cold."

The man reaches forward, placing a gentle hand on his partner's shoulder. This scene is rolling out differently than he might have expected earlier. In place of the anger or the malice that he'd anticipated, or even the cockiness or the smug contentment after another kill, the man finds that his partner seems more flustered than anything else.

"Did you go with him?"

The boy shakes his head, dark hair falling into dark eyes, his gaze sharp and pointed somewhere far off in the shadows, never rising to meet the man's face.

“Of course I didn’t. Not with all of those little… *hors d’oeuvres* running around.”

The man spits a laugh, reeling back in his surprise.

“Keith! That’s a really bad thing to say, they’re kids!”

It’s rare that his partner will joke with him, that he’ll say or do anything with the intention of making anyone else laugh. It’s unusual to see him so out of his element too—to witness him standing here, embarrassed and confused. To realize that, sometimes, some people truly are capable of hurling curve balls in his direction that he isn’t trained well enough emotionally to catch.

The man can sense it, in this moment, from his partner’s small smile to the way that he eases easier into his touch, his gentle, comforting embrace. From the way that things feel lighter now, the mood feels less oppressive, less tired. Their sleepy morning world feels somehow bigger, as though suddenly, a veil has been lifted from both of their eyes.

Something has changed in his partner, he can feel it.

And it’s not hunger, or jealousy, or anger or fear…

It’s curiosity.

And he hopes, for Lance’s sake at the very least, that this newfound interest in him won’t end in anything bloody, or violent, or final.

He hasn’t seen Keith this excited in a very long time.

He wonders what it is about this boy that’s piqued both of their interests.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lance draws in a deep breath, wiping the snow from the frozen surface of the merry-go-round on which he sits before leaning further back against the bars. The rusted body of it groans under his weight, complaining loudly into a silent, black night as he peers through the cloud of his own breath in the air into the shadows.

Christmas is one week from now, and over the last few days, he's grown more and more determined that the only present that he might actually want will eventually materialize like smoke from blackened silence. As quickly as it sometimes soaks into the dark, Lance feels as though one of these nights, if he's quiet and careful and his timing is just right…

Maybe the boy will come join him again.

It's been a couple of weeks since he last saw him—since that night that they talked under the flickering street lamp that's now just as broken and useless as all of the others in their lot. Other people in the community have complained to the city council about the darkness that's now enveloped their bleak winter evenings, but it seems, no matter how many times that they replace the bulbs, something always happens to them within a few days.

Glass litters the streets now. It glitters in the evening sunset as he walks the path to his shift at the convenience store. The remaining pieces cling to the metal screws high up on the streetlamps, quickly becoming encased in icicles and hanging, petrified, like fossils of an ancient city now smothered in the dark. They've slowly become a Pompeii painted in grayscale. A Roanoke mystery that he's watching unfold before his very eyes.

Lance has his suspicions, but he also has a feeling that anything that he might be able to warn his fellow townsfolk about might sound too insane for anyone to possibly believe him.

Like any reasonable person, Lance has decided to leave it alone. He hasn't mentioned his interest in the new neighbors to his sister, or alluded to the fact that he still joins Shiro for his early morning smoke

every time that the two of them meet face to face after work. He doesn't mention that the other neighbor—Keith, he thinks, if he's the same person who Shiro referenced in passing before—apparently doesn't get cold even half naked in the snow. And he definitely hasn't mentioned that there's anything peculiar about either of them, no matter how undoubtedly the reality of whatever they're hiding behind closed doors seems as though it might be just the sort of thing that he should alert the authorities about.

Because lately… ever since he met "Keith", that boy, whatever his real name might be, under the streetlamp, ever since they spoke face to face and Lance had felt in that moment as though maybe he didn't need to be quite as afraid of him as he'd originally assumed—

Ever since that night, the police have been going door to door asking about the disappearance of an elderly man from town. The owner of a family-run pizza place, an alcoholic and a frequenter of the only strip club for nearly a dozen miles outside of the town's limits. He wasn't a bad man, but a flawed, normal person.

He wasn't the sort of man who deserved the apparent death sentence that he got, so abruptly, without even the chance to say goodbye.

Some folks around town have concluded that he must have fallen into the river while he was drunk, but when the cops cracked the ice and skimmed the bottom, they didn't find anything but sleeping fish and garbage. Others surmise that he must have skipped town with one of the women that he met in their area's single bar. The town doesn't seem particularly rattled about his demise—tragedy settles over these houses like a second skin. Unhappiness and eerie mysteries seem as though they sleep within the fog that rolls down from the mountains.

But Lance has his suspicions, and Lance saw Shiro stumbling through the complex the night of the man's disappearance, carrying the second leaking trash bag that Lance has witnessed him struggling with since he moved in less than a month ago.

He thinks about it, while he waits… about that night, what he was doing, and those eyes that he felt watching him, like an ant under a hot magnifying glass.

Last Tuesday
December 11th

10:40 P.M.

Three hours and fifteen minutes prior to discovery.

Lance, in a clammy, soaked convenience store uniform, shuffled about uncomfortably behind the counter as Hunk ran a dry mop over the puddles that he'd trailed in behind him on the floor. Looking back on it, he still doesn't know how he might have avoided the *Final Destination* style proverbial death of his own comfort and dryness for the evening, but Hunk, at the time, had laughed as he'd lectured him about sticking to the snowy yards in favor of the icy sidewalks.

"You can't tell me that you didn't know that a bunch of melted snow was in the potholes, dude," Hunk had told him, tipping his head to the side with a wry smile curling up the corners of his lips, "I mean, you've been here for, what, ten years now? You don't know how deep the potholes are yet?"

Lance had bristled almost visibly. He'd felt the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. The sun outside had long-since set, and the air conditioning keeping the convenience store at a crisp 60 degrees Fahrenheit was doing his damp outfit no favors. He'd sent Hunk nothing but a stern, unamused frown, rolling his eyes and shoving himself away from the counter towards the bathroom.

"I'm going to try drying myself off under the hand dryer."

Hunk had laughed again, reminding him that it had been broken for the last two weeks at that point, and it was only capable of spitting out even more frigid air.

Hunk had offered twice earlier to allow him to go home to change into something else, promising that he wouldn't tell their boss if Lance were to be caught out of uniform, and to back him up if any nosy customers might have complained. But the walk back to his apartment had seemed daunting when Lance had thought about it—colder while he was so soaked, and risky when he wasn't sure if another car would speed through any of the other various puddles of melted snow on his route and douse him yet again.

Hunk drove nothing but a sputtering, frequently defunct moped. He'd

offered that as well, but without a license, Lance didn't know what good it would do him. He was virtually stuck—sans maybe asking Hunk to go back to his place and grab an outfit for him, but he hadn't been willing to ask that of his friend either, and so, he'd found himself trapped in his soaked clothes until the end of his shift.

The wetness really isn't pertinent to the rest of his story, he thinks. But the wetness is important only because it was a clearly traumatic event that surely affected his better judgement for the rest of the night and the early morning later on.

He might tell himself now, *"Yeah, sure, I would've called the cops when I saw Shiro if I wasn't so ready to just go home and sleep!"*

Or even, *"It seemed weird, sure, especially since that wasn't the first time that I've ever seen the guy carrying some kind of carcass puree in a trash bag back to his place, but… I'd had a bad day, alright? I wasn't really in the mood for the murder mystery."*

But as the truth stood, he was wet and miserable, and he couldn't deny that Shiro was pretty handsome, and nice, and maybe one of the only things anymore that he'd really been able to look forward to reliably, and he wasn't about to ruin that just because of some weird situation that was, surely, nothing but a huge misunderstanding.

Lance, considering himself a fairly accurate judge of character, thinks now that Shiro must have been bringing home some weird thing from his mysterious new job. He might have been moving roadkill somewhere more safe after he'd plowed over it in that horrible, wheezing car of his. He must have been doing anything but carting the dead body of that missing old geezer back to his place to do God knows what to the corpse.

He doesn't have the personality of a murderer. He isn't the kind of person who Lance could imagine hurting anyone, for really any reason.

And he knows that he's probably wrong about that. He knows that his crush on Shiro is probably compelling him to excuse some kind of Hannibal Lecter-Dexter-Jigsaw Killer crossover torture-murder combo. He knows that, in general, most people will say that you can never know a killer just by looking them in the eyes.

But even still, he wants to believe now that he didn't just allow someone to get away with murder. He didn't witness a crime that night. He'd just misunderstood what was really going on.

That night, while he attempted and failed to dry his soggy uniform under the cold air of the men's bathroom hand dryer, Lance wasn't particularly focused on the peculiarities of his neighbors back home. He wasn't thinking about anything but how miserable it felt to have those damp clothes clinging to him—how he felt so much more like a wet noodle than he had even weeks ago when he'd first talked to Shiro, and how much better he might feel in that moment had Shiro himself actually been there to offer him one of his trademark sunshine smiles.

Lance had felt then, destitute, but somehow hopeful, too. He'd wondered if, with the way that things were going, he might find himself rewarded for his patience at the end of the night with Shiro, reliably waiting for him. If maybe they could talk some more, and Lance could admire the way that Shiro held his cigarette, gracefully poised between two fingers before slowly lifting it to his lips. And Lance could drink in the shadows of the dark night bleeding into the crevices of Shiro's chiseled face, and the bend of his bulky muscles under his coat, lazy and lax but somehow still crafted from stone as he leaned against the brick wall of his apartment building. He could breathe in the marbled Adonis of Shiro's perfect physique, the soft velvet of his reassuring words when Lance complained about his day, the melody of his laughter when Lance made a funny enough joke.

Or maybe, even, if not Shiro, Lance could find himself in the presence of that strange boy again—enchanted by some force surrounding him and unable to untangle himself from the web that such a sinister but gorgeous spider had weaved around him.

Both men, he'd thought, were so beautiful that it was almost unreal. Both men seemed entirely too good to be true.

From the outside, at least, Lance had thought to himself. He'd clicked his tongue when the frigid spray of air had only managed to make him all the more chilly. It wasn't drying him quickly enough to give him any relief. He resigned himself to spending the rest of his shift clammy and uncomfortable.

Both Shiro and Keith were dangerous in a way that he couldn't quite understand.

It terrified him, perplexed him.

And even still… it drew him in.

He'd returned to his shift still wet. He'd helped Hunk talk a young

couple just passing through on their way to the ski lodge out of buying one of their shitty, cheap phone chargers in favor of visiting the tech store up the street.

There was some level of integrity to doing this job, at least. He didn't feel right allowing anyone to waste their money on a piece of cheap plastic and half-functional machinery that wouldn't last even the twenty extra minutes that it would take for them to reach their destination.

And the night passed gradually.

He undressed in the break room at the end of his shift, donned his janitor's uniform, and trekked to the middle school to clean the floors yet again.

It had seemed, back then, to be a completely unremarkable night.

He'd never been particularly skilled when it came to clairvoyance.

Last Wednesday
December 12th
4:03 A.M.

Two minutes prior to the time of discovery.

An hour early, he returned to the apartment complex.

When he rounded the corner of the street, toeing the mouth of the complex and shivering with the residual chills of the wet uniform sitting in his backpack, he'd spotted a shadowed figure stumbling through the ice unmelted in the parking lot.

At first, it was nothing but a blob of black. Lance's eyes struggled to pick apart the sense of motion from the wall of darkness in front of him. He'd flicked his gaze to the spot in the night where the streetlamp should have been shining. He'd wondered what was happening to this town, to his home here. He'd felt a chill shiver up his spine.

But eventually, under the subtle shine of window's lights through cracked blinds up above, he'd realized that the movement that he was sensing was a person moving around. And that person was carrying something heavy and having a hard time. He'd rushed forward against any better judgement that he might have had—any advice that his father might have given him a long time ago about not to approaching strangers in the late night—and he'd called out to the figure and only stilled when he'd caught them jerk around as though they'd been struck by the sound of his voice alone.

"L-Lance!" It was Shiro, once again, winded and nearly sputtering, speaking to him in urgent, clipped and uneven words that made dread pool in the recesses of Lance's belly. "H-hey… buddy… I—I can't talk right now, I need—I need to do something, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

He'd rushed off after that. The familiar black trash bag slung over his shoulder had jostled as he'd fumbled his way towards his building. Lance had stood still for a long while, just watching him go. He'd watched the way that he'd reached out a hand and steadied himself against the bricks of his building before climbing the stairs. He'd watched his dark figure disappear up the staircase in the absence of a porch light that Lance remembered standing underneath with him some weeks ago.

And he'd taken a tentative step forward after that, watching his feet dwarfed in the sizable marks that Shiro had left behind in the snow. They were deep and long, kicked up in places where Shiro had slipped on the ice. And they were dotted with something dark, something copper-scented. A stench hung in the air behind him like the phantom of a mushroom cloud polluting the atmosphere.

Lance leaned down, righted his backpack strapped around each shoulder. He pressed his fingers into the dark stain in the sparkling white.

Raising it to his eyes, he could just barely make out the red tint of it. He could smell the bitterness of it, recognized it finally for what it was, felt the bile jittering in his belly, just waiting to crawl up into his throat.

And he didn't react for a long while. Just stared at the sight of it glistening dull against his fingertips. He used to get nosebleeds frequently when he was a little kid. His mother used to dot a wet, warm rag against his upper lip as she cautioned him to let it clot instead of tipping his head back.

His mom was always very resourceful in times of crisis. No matter what happened, she always knew what to do.

Lance made a beeline from one point, there, in the dotted aftermath of whatever terrible thing Shiro had done. He went to the shed where the maintenance men kept the lawn mower, the rock salt, the various supplies seldom used to renovate things about the complex.

The lock had long since rusted and been broken away. No one had ever bothered to replace it. He fetched the snow shovel, dropped his bag next to the door and ventured back out into the parking lot.

And if anyone were to ask him now why he shoveled every last speck of evidence away from Shiro's path, away from the parking lot, into a dumpster three buildings down. If anyone were to ask him why he'd worked so meticulously, why he'd even went as far as to check where Shiro had pressed his hand and wiped away the stain left there with the corner of his own sleeve…

Lance wouldn't know how to respond.

But it had felt, in that moment, very important to do so. It had felt as though taking part in whatever sick thing he'd just witnessed was the most important decision that he might ever make in his life.

An accomplice, he'd known it. He'd known that he was doing something wrong.

And he wouldn't be able to explain it, why he'd done it.

But it had felt, as he'd tucked the shovel back into the shed and slung his backpack over his shoulders once again, like the right thing to do.

And now, as he waits, he wonders if he should regret it.

He wonders if he shouldn't be getting himself more involved in this than he already has.

He wonders if he should have brought some kind of bait with him—like a bloody steak or some kind of weird-boy pheromones. Something that might attract could-be supernatural entities, instead of sitting on this merry-go-round hopelessly on his one real night off in a long time, just hoping that maybe their schedules might overlap and their paths might cross again.

It's funny, thinking about bringing something with him to catch

Keith's attention. He thinks about putting a piece of meat under a box, held up by a stick on a string. He thinks about trapping Keith in there and finally dragging him back to his apartment to clean him up and get him something to eat. He's never had a pet before, and he's never caught a wild animal. He's never felt the need to touch a hot flame with bare fingers, or to bet his all in a gamble that he really might lose.

But he imagines that he's doing all of that tonight. He doesn't know why meeting Keith again is so important. He doesn't know why he's suddenly in such a reckless frame of mind.

But maybe, as an accomplice, he feels as though he deserves some answers. Granted, Shiro doesn't know anything about it. He might not even know that Lance met Keith. He's never mentioned it since that night—never brought up Keith's name since the first time, and barely addressed those two very similar, sinister scenes that Lance had witnessed one evening a few nights ago, while the two of them stood together and Shiro allowed his cigarette to burn down to the filter without ever taking a drag.

"I'm sorry that you had to see me like that," Shiro had told him, *"Sometimes I have to take my work home. It isn't pretty, and I know it might seem confusing to you. But I promise that everything will be okay for you. You aren't in any danger."*

Lance knows now that Shiro is a nurse's assistant. He'd told him once before, when Lance had actually taken a moment to look down near Shiro's feet and had caught sight of the scrub pants catching in the snow. He'd noted them tactlessly, perhaps even back then already attempting to concoct a proper alibi for a guy who he wasn't even positive was guilty of anything nefarious in the first place. But he'd cataloged that conversation, tucked away the memory of Shiro's sweet smile when he'd talked about getting his nurse's license someday.

"A lot of things got in the way," Shiro had added, as well. Which was vague enough that Lance knew better not to question it, *"But I have time to get there someday. I really have… nothing but time. More time than I'll ever know what to do with."*

A cryptic statement accompanied by stiff laughter. Lance hadn't really gotten the joke, but he'd offered a small chuckle just to keep the mood comfortable.

So when Shiro had told him that he'd brought home his work only

days later, Lance had all of the information required to call his bullshit. He'd been more than capable of telling Shiro that he knew that something was going on, and he needed to start talking or Lance was going to the police. But, as he's found that they often do while in Shiro's presence, his words had swelled in his throat, and he'd choked on any argument that he might have wanted to make—stumbled over accusations that he might have mounted half-heartedly. Dithered when he should have demanded answers, hesitated until that moment quickly melted away.

And the next morning, the missing person posters had been stapled to lamp posts all over town—hung in store windows, and tacked up on bulletin boards. Lance had looked the face of that old man in the eyes as his sister had browsed the ads on the board just outside of the grocery store. He'd stared at his smile in that black and white, over-processed photo. He'd wondered where he'd gone to—what sort of expression he could have been making from the inside of Shiro's black trash bag.

The slush of snow had been stained in gray mud when they'd pushed their cartful of groceries out to his sister's car. They'd bought a turkey for Christmas dinner. The pink tint of the ham, and the blood collecting in the bottom of the plastic shrink-wrap surrounding the girth of it had been enough, while selecting their dinner, that Lance had lied and said that his nephews had both begged him for a turkey instead.

But he'd thought about that ham—about Christmas dinner, about shovels full of black-stained snow. He'd thought about how hard his heart had thumped in his chest when the garbage men had emptied the dumpers into their tucks. He'd wondered how many traces of blood were left in the plastic fibers of it. If perhaps search dogs could sniff it out, and they'd lift his prints from the shovel later on.

But time had passed. And he'd started wondering, instead, what the point of even bringing the body back to the complex could be. His sister told him that she'd talked to the neighbors of "the trash who put newspaper in their windows"—that no one had a single complaint about the guy since he'd taken that monstrosity down. She'd spoken in the singular, as though herself, and anyone else involved had no idea that there was even a second person in there. She didn't mention a rancid smell, or suspicious hacksaw noises. It didn't seem as though anyone in the complex had noticed anything amiss at all.

And Lance had a suspicion then, that whatever this all meant—

whatever the conclusion could possibly be—it had to lead back to Keith somehow. He seemed to be the missing piece of the puzzle that might make everything click into place. He must have been the final mystery of this entire tangled web of deceit and paranoia and property damage that would make everything shuffle into vivid clarity.

So Lance had devised the best plan that he had. He'd allocated his free time to snooping around the complex. He'd contemplated setting traps and laying out bait. He'd considered even marching right up those stairs and knocking on what he thought might be the right door.

But he'd settled eventually on simply staking it out. Waiting around hopelessly and wondering what could possibly make him look like an even more delicious meal. Or… victim. Or whatever it was about that old man that had perhaps compelled Shiro to maim him in the first place.

He hasn't gotten that far with his theories yet. He's still trying to prove to himself that Keith wasn't just an exhaustion-fueled hallucination.

He's been sitting here for…

He checks his phone.

An hour and fifteen minutes. It's nearing 2AM.

He wonders if Shiro will show up before Keith even has a chance to—and if Keith is a real person, where he could possibly go when he isn't standing ominously under the now-dead streetlamp or pushing himself side to side on this merry-go-round.

And he's offended, for a mere moment, when he thinks about all of his suspicions and his fears about Keith. If he really is some kind of demon that eats people, and if Shiro really is maybe… also a demon, Lance isn't sure yet. He doesn't know how Shiro fits into any of this much more than he knows about Keith—

But if there really is some supernatural conspiracy at work here, then why isn't he good enough to be demon food? Why have the two of them seemed so adamant to keep him in the dark here, when surely, the guy who keeps poking around in their business and is obviously interested in at least one of them on a more personal—and highly inappropriate, given the circumstances—level must be the easiest prey around?

He crosses his arms over his chest, tapping his foot in the snow and pushing out a hard breath through his nostrils. Tonight is the third night that he's sat outside fruitlessly, waiting for a mirage of a boy to appear who might have never existed at all. Shiro had caught him the first time, just as he'd been coming back from his redeye shift at the hospital. He'd waved at Lance, asked if he could join him on the merry-go-round, and Lance had been too flustered by the mere idea that Shiro might have thought that he actually spent his nights out here just for shits and giggles and not for important detective work to even grill him for any potential details that he could find.

And he hadn't been sure back then if just coming out and saying, *"So, is Keith real? And if he's real, is he some kind of wendigo or chupacabra or incubus? "* was an appropriate greeting at their current level of acquaintanceship or not.

The second night, it had been completely void of any life outside. He'd watched as gradually each of the lights in each of the apartment windows had flipped off. He'd watched people close their curtains and he'd listened to the slow decline of noise pollution seeping in from the town just a few blocks away. He'd been left alone in the dark and the cold and the silence. He'd been kept company only by his own breath in the air fooling him into thinking that he'd seen movement multiple times.

Hunk had texted him asking if he wanted to come to a party that night. When he'd said that he was busy "sleuthing", Hunk hadn't even had the will to question it anymore.

He feels as though he's being driven insane by these two people. He wonders if, in the end, he'll learn someday that this was all in his head all along.

He allows himself to fall back onto the frigid surface of the merry-go-round. He settles into the soft, unmarked snow on top of it, splaying out his arms wide as though he might shuffle them to make a snow angel. The night sky is vast and speckled with light. He tries to remember the constellations. He gets lost somewhere between Betelgeuse and Orion's Belt—his thoughts ebbing into imagination, into memories of nights on warm, sandy beaches, with his mother's fingers combing through his hair.

His sister had become a mother when his parents died. And less than a year later, he'd aged a decade when his niece was born.

He imagines, as he lays here and pretends that the snow melting around him is his mother's lap—his mothers hands, his mother's soft lips pressed against his cheeks—that he must seem like a mountain to his young relatives. He must seem just as aged and wise and unshakable as all of the grownups seemed to him when he was still young.

But he allows himself to feel small now. He allows himself to get lost in the tide of a slow-moving universe, and to revel in the anonymity of his own mortality—the realization that someday, this pain and frustration will dissipate when he's lowered in a coffin into the ground. And all that might be left of him, the only inkling of his fingerprint left on this world, might be the legacy that his niece and nephews leave behind with all of the opportunities that he's determined to give them.

Life as a single grain of sand on a vast, endless beach. His problems, his worries and his fears—they're nothing but a speck in a deep ocean of time. He's nothing but a star not even bright enough to register in the night sky.

He closes his eyes.

And he welcomes the feeling that comes over him—something heavy and cold. Like a shadow of clouds moving over the moon. Like sleep, too calm. As though he's been medicated and every sensation from this moment onward is muted and almost unreal. Every hair on his body stands on end.

"I'm not dead," he says aloud to no one, "Did you only come here because you thought that I was?"

"I haven't been avoiding you," No one says back.

His brief laugh is a crack in the silent courtyard. He pulls himself back up into a seated position, his arms wrapped around one knee, the opposite foot steadying him on the ground.

"I didn't say that you were."

Everything in front of him is an unmoving sheet of black. Under the dim light of the stars and the moon, in the absence of streetlamps, of lights shining through the cracks of curtains, of porch lights or headlights or flashlights in search-and-rescue groups, looking for that old man—

Lance sees nothing but the scrawny trunks of bare legs peeking out from under the thick black shadow of Keith's puffy coat. He can't see those dark pebble eyes watching him, but he can feel them like insects crawling on his skin.

"You flaked out on our date."

Keith scoffs audibly. He shuffles about in place.

"I never said it was a date."

"You said you'd come home with me."

"You're an idiot for inviting strangers into your house."

"Why? Because one of them might be the boogeyman?"

He makes a ghostly *"Oooooh"* noise then, waving his hands in short, rubbery motions in the air in front of him. Even obscured in darkness, Lance can tell that Keith is offended. Good, he thinks. Serves him right for not recognizing Lance as the delicacy that he obviously is.

As though, for some reason, the flattery of being chosen for some kind of cannibalism-slash-cult-ritual-slash-serial-killer-venture would outweigh the obvious downsides, like… being murdered before he even got a chance to bring Shiro out to a nice restaurant for dinner. Or to see if he could ever manage to make Keith smile.

He thinks that his priorities might be dangerously skewed here. He decides that, right now, he doesn't care.

Lance wipes the snow from his shoulders and reaches what he can on his back. He sucks in the side of his cheek, cocking his head to the side as his eyes begin to refocus in the darkness and he can barely make out the edges of Keith's pretty face. He likes to imagine that he could bring color to those pearly cheeks. He likes to think that he could make Keith laugh so loud that he might open his mouth and reveal those mysteriously sharp teeth.

He likes to think that he could find the right thing to say right now, to make Keith stay, if only he weren't so suddenly, irrevocably entranced by how gorgeous he looks under the moonlight.

Skinny and drowning in an oversized coat, with messy hair, with bare legs. His high cheekbones catch the shadows. The divot of a full bottom lip holds the darkness underneath it indelibly. His porcelain

skin seems to glow now, even in the lightless night. He seems like a star himself, dropped from the sky and rooted in the snow here—glittering in his own right, like a diamond caked in soot, just waiting to be polished.

“So are you here to take me up on my offer?”

Keith hesitates. Lance can see a strange kind of uncertainty settling on his features. He recognizes it from somewhere—frets over that expression for a mere, befuddled moment before realizing that it’s the same frown that Shiro had offered him when they’d shook hands.

He wonders what’s warring in Keith’s thoughts, too. What the two of them have considered in these two very different moments, and what the wrong decision could mean for him.

“It’s dangerous,” Keith tells him.

Lance smiles.

“I like dangerous. Why do you think I waited all this time out here for you?”

Moth and flame. Wolf and sheep.

Lance doesn’t know why he’s so compelled to wander into this particular spider’s web. He doesn’t know why he’s stoking the hornet’s nest like he’d rekindling a fire.

But Keith is pretty and mysterious, and he seems to have all of the answers to all of the questions that have kept Lance up at night over these last few weeks.

His grain of sand, his hidden star, his directionless life—

He puts them in Keith’s hands. And whatever happens once Keith agrees to come home with him, he imagines that it must be more interesting, at the very least, than anything that he’s lived through so far.

Chapter End Notes

> Hi again! I'm pretty sure I'm updating this story a week early, and I'm so sorry if I am! I've been super busy lately, so I realized that I'd written my schedule for this story wrong, so... I figured that I might as well just follow it this week, then announce the changes

in this chapter.

So, as it is, we're still going to be updating every other week until October, at least. That means that the next update will be September 21st! So, until then, thank you so much for reading, and for your patience!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Going home for the night, Ryou?”

A man—Takashi Shirogane, but Ryou Yamazaki to his coworkers at this particular hospital in this particular town—turns slowly, smiling sweetly, tired, at a receptionist who smiles back. The lights are too bright, and his head thrums with an exhausted need to find the nearest soft surface and go to sleep. He’s been awake for twenty hours now, working an emergency overtime shift for a gas leak at a local post office, and more than anything, he wants to be out of here, at home in the quiet and the dark, as soon as possible.

But even still, he chooses to be kind. This woman has been sweet to him since he started here, and he knows that it’s in his best interest to make a good impression.

“Yes,” he says softly, a hand combing through messy hair, “It’s been a long night. I think it’s time to get some sleep.”

She sits straighter in her chair, running a tongue between her lips as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. She’s sitting now, leaned forward, in a way that presses her breasts together beneath the button-up that she’s undone the top button from. Shiro doesn’t like getting ahead of himself, and he definitely isn’t the sort of person to make tall assumptions about the motives of other people, but he’s been suspicious of her for weeks now.

He has a decent idea of what she’s going to ask him before she even manages to get the words out.

“By the way, uh, Ryou, I was thinking, if you ever have some free time, maybe… we could go get some coffee?”

Shiro almost laughs. He almost spills his guts right here and now—if only to avoid the inevitable end of all of this that he knows someday will come. He almost tells her, *“You’re toeing a dangerous tightrope now, dear. You’d better stay as far away from me as you possibly can.”*

But instead, he flicks his gaze away. He tucks his hand in the pocket of his scrub pants and fishes out his car keys.

“If I *had* free time,” he tells her, “Maybe, sure. But I don’t think I have any of that, I’m sorry.”

It’s not a complete lie, but he feels guilty when her smile falters. He wishes her a good night, which she returns halfheartedly. Shiro knows that he probably could have used any myriad of excuses—could have told her that his preferences don’t extend to women, come out in a way that he definitely wouldn’t have felt safe doing when he was young.

He knows that times are now changing. He knows that he doesn’t have anything to lose anymore.

Her cheeks are pink when he turns to give her one last wave goodbye. She’s staring hard at the computer screen in front of her, seemingly determined to avoid catching his eye now that she must think that she’s made a fool out of herself.

There’s a part of him—a lonely, needy part—that yearns for the warmth and acceptance of his fellow man. He wants to fit in with them, just as he must have years ago. He wants to understand and be understood by them, to spend some time with people who he hasn’t spent weeks and months alone with, people who might actually manage to surprise him from time to time.

He knows that Keith is lonely too. Even more so than himself, he lives a secluded, fish bowl life. He sees only the same sights, the same person, the same monotonous backdrop hundreds of times in different cities and different towns. Just dark and empty apartments. Just polluted, starless skies.

Shiro wonders if it’s selfish for him to wish for something more. He wonders if Keith might have blamed him if he’d taken up that girl on her offer to go out for coffee.

But he thinks, as he steps through the automatic doors into the snowy night, that he shouldn’t let these people get closer to him than they need to. He’d already fumbled with poor Lance, introduced himself with his real name in place of the new identity that he’d bought from some shady dealer before they’d left their previous home, and he still has no idea where that big mistake will lead both of them. He doesn’t know if Keith sees him as nothing but a particularly delicious Christmas dinner, or if maybe there’s something more serious going on. Keith avoids his questions when he asks. Keith is prickly about his own feelings even when they don’t hold nearly as much weight as this.

But Shiro recognizes something in Lance, and he'd noticed after he left Lance, carrying that trash bag in surely the most suspicious scene possible, that the mess that he'd left behind had been cleared away. He'd come outside as soon as he'd placed the bag in the bathroom to wipe away the evidence, but when he'd reached the edge of his building, he'd realized that someone else had beaten him to it.

He remembers this sort of situation from only one time before. He knows, undoubtedly, that even if Keith and Lance themselves don't realize it, something is going on between them.

And how does that make him feel? He isn't sure. He knows that he should be jealous. He knows that he should be suspicious. He knows that he should fight for Keith's love, but he doesn't own Keith—hasn't in a very, very long time.

Keith isn't his lover, his boyfriend, or someone who he has the right to lay claim to. Keith isn't a domesticated thing that can be trained to live a life even remotely resembling anything that might sleep in Shiro's fantasies.

Keith is just the person who owns his heart.

And he decides, unlocking his car and sliding into the seat, that whatever Keith wants, whatever makes him happy, Shiro will continue to follow him from place to place dutifully. Forever, until Keith doesn't need him anymore. Until he's dead.

After all, he owes Keith everything.

After all, without Keith, he doesn't even know who he is anymore.

"Usually, I tell people to be quiet when they come over late, but I guess I don't really have to worry about that with you."

The boy, Keith, sends him a strange look in response to that joke—brows drawn low and close together as Lance leads him down the hall towards the front door of his apartment. It's dead silent now, so dark that Lance's memory alone is the only thing allowing him to navigate the way. Usually, in situations like these, he might be able to sense another person's presence behind him. He might be able to hear their

breathing or their feet tapping against the concrete. But with Keith, he feels as though he's being tailed by his own shadow—as though he's less of a physical person and more of an apparition, and Lance is reminded, once again, that he needs to get to the bottom of this so he can finally stop being surprised every time that Keith does anything abnormal.

He fishes his keys out of his pocket, sliding them into the keyhole and turning the doorknob. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see the black blob of Keith standing darker against the shadowed hall, and he wonders if maybe he was right. Maybe he wasn't warning Lance for nothing. Maybe this really is a terrible, dangerous idea, and when something horrible happens, when everything goes up in flames and Lance looks back on all of the mistakes that he's made to lead him to his untimely end, he'll know that it was no one's fault but his own.

But he feels now as though a spell has been cast over him—he'd give Keith anything if Keith asked it of him. He'd do anything in his power to get closer to Keith, and to finally understand him.

He pushes open the door, stepping inside and hanging his keys on the hook right across from him on the wall. They jingle against his sister's keyring, and he reaches forward to steady them in hopes of staying as quiet as he can. He can't imagine that his sister would be upset with him for bringing someone home tonight, but he thinks that she might have appreciated a warning. And he doesn't know how to explain to her where he met Keith in the first place, and why he's never brought him up prior to sneaking him in here only a couple of hours before sunrise.

He turns around again, already a few feet inside of his apartment, before he realizes that Keith still hasn't stepped over the threshold.

But Keith isn't looking at him, isn't making any effort to speak. He's shoved his hands into his coat pockets, and in the dim glow of the nightlights that his sister has placed around the apartment for his nephews, he can see Keith's dirty toes wriggle over the top of the prickly welcome mat.

Abruptly, Keith's eyes flick up to meet his. Lance feels as though he's been doused with ice water.

"I can't come in," Keith tells him, even and flat, "Not unless you invite me."

Lance is caught for a moment between swallowing heavily and

laughing. The sound that leaves him is a combination of the two, and it's peculiar enough that Keith's stiff expression laxes out into something more akin to confusion. He rolls from the pads of his feet to his heels, hands still in the pockets of that oversized coat. And he glances back and forth, from one side of the hall to the other, as though anyone would actually be outside to witness him standing out there at this time of the night.

Lance clears his throat.

"Y-you can come in," he says, "Do you… do you need to be invited into every room, or—"

"Just the front," Keith tells him, brief and curt and perhaps even somewhat embarrassed as he shoves inside and tugs the door closed quietly behind him.

He takes a moment to wipe his feet on the mat, but Lance supposes that it probably won't do much good with how filthy they are. But he appreciates the good manners and the consideration of the act anyway. He's surprised, somewhat, that Keith would remember to do something like that, considering how wild he always seems to be. How unruly he is, how Lance has consistently felt something boiling within him, as though forever threatening to push over to the top, if only he's given the right opportunity.

Keith looks very strange and out of place in Lance's tiny, dimly lit kitchen. His skin takes on the golden hue of the night lights. His paleness, the dark pebbles of his eyes, his brassy, tangled hair—he looks as though someone has cut a photo of him from a grunge zine and glued him in *Good Housekeeping* . Lance is reminded once again of his long, bony legs. Of the bird chest that heaves under the coat. Of how easily he could conceivably be cracked and crumbled in the right hands, in the right, strong gust of wind.

Keith doesn't look scary or tough now. He doesn't seem like an apex predator picking through the dark cold of the night. He looks awkward, and small, and out of place. He looks like he doesn't know what to do with himself here.

Without a moment's hesitation, without the regular trepidation or insecurity that might keep Lance from reaching out and touching another person, Lance grasps Keith by the wrist, tugging him through the darkened halls towards the bathroom. Keith, noiseless and devoid of a presence as he always is, doesn't need to be told to keep it down.

But Lance himself is mindful of the creaky floorboards, and the spots in the hall where he frequently stubs his toes or knocks his arms into photographs hanging precariously on their nails.

He's met with no resistance when he pulls Keith into the bathroom. And even though it's barely big enough to fit one normal-sized adult and a toddler—as Lance has learned from many experiences giving his young relatives baths in the past—Keith also neglects to complain about how cramped it is.

But Lance imagines that Keith must be familiar with how tiny the rooms are in these apartments, especially, Lance thinks, since the one-bedrooms are a decent amount smaller than even the three bedroom that Lance and his sister opted for instead.

Lance pulls the bathroom door closed, swallowing thickly, feeling as though he's doing something that he should feel guilty about, despite how innocent his intentions here really are. And he thanks the landlord for installing slide lights in the bathrooms, at least, when he's able to turn them up just bright enough that he can see, but stops once he notices Keith growing antsy.

Wordlessly, he lets go of Keith's wrist, padding over to the bathtub and pushing aside the various toys that his nephews left sitting on the edge of it. He sticks the plug in the drain, runs the water lukewarm because, frankly, he has no idea if Keith can tolerate hot temperatures or not.

And when he turns and waves Keith over, Keith looks at him as though he's gone completely mad.

"You can't be serious."

Lance raises an eyebrow.

"Do you really think I'm gonna let you walk around in my house with those filthy feet?"

Keith raises one foot upward, craning his ankle so he can gaze down at the pad of it. He juts out his bottom lip, as though in contemplation. He seems to be caught between saying one thing and doing another, and so Lance cuts that train of thought short before he can decide.

"Look, if you're gonna ask why I needed to get you in here so bad, I have no idea either. Maybe… that's why, I don't know. Maybe I just

need to find out why I keep… thinking about you. Maybe I just wanted to see if you'd actually come in."

Keith's foot drops noiselessly back to the floor. He shuffles a bit, wiggles his toes against the linoleum. And finally, after a long breath, he draws forward, stepping slowly into the gradually filling tub, scooting the length of it away from Lance before taking a seat.

"I can wash my own feet," Keith says lowly, gruffly, glaring at the water and making no effort to look at Lance's face, "You and Shiro both act like I'm completely incapable of ever doing anything on my own."

He takes Lance's offered wash cloth. He dips it into the water, scrubbing harshly at his feet without the redness rising under his skin that Lance is expecting.

And he does so without rolling up his sleeves—without worrying about the water dripping from the cloth and dotting the front of his tattered coat.

Lance watches the way that the beads of water roll over his porcelain skin. He watches the way that it gathers in the hollow caverns of his calves dipping into his ankles. He watches Keith's nimble fingers scrubbing away the dirt and melted, dried snow. The blackening water, the pallid pale of Keith's flesh that never darkens, that seems to glow no matter how much light is illuminating it.

It reminds him of a fountain that he used to throw coins in with his father when he was a kid. The stone, unyielding, stayed seemingly dry under the spray around it. It would glisten in the moisture and the sunlight, but its color, its texture never changed. It didn't draw in the water like a cloth, or hair, or skin would. The water, instead, rolled around it. And they seemed to exist as two separate things that never quite mixed together completely.

His father had told him once, when he'd asked, that eventually the water would erode the stone away. Everything, his dad told him, would wear down someday, somehow. But nothing lived forever, and stone wasn't always unbreakable when given time. They'd need to turn off the fountain eventually and repair that statue in the center of it. They'd need to replace the metal pipes underneath it, and the machinery that kept it running every day.

Being unbreakable, his father had told him, was nothing but an illusion. Behind the scenes, where he couldn't see, there was always so

much more to it.

And Lance wonders, watching Keith work away the mess dotting his legs, what might break someone like Keith down.

If someday, just like everything else in the universe, if Keith too might wither to nothing.

Or if maybe, against all odds, his father was wrong.

Keith seems frail and fragile and small under that puffy, dirty coat. He seems defenseless, sitting here in Lance's poorly lit, cramped bathroom. He seems as though a strong breeze might knock him over, as though the slightest touch might shatter him to nothing but dust and rubble, as though he's barely hanging on.

But underneath that perfect skin, those dark-circled eyes, that mop of brassy hair and the meek, unpracticed way that he's been carrying himself since they got here, as though he doesn't know what to do in the face of another person's kindness—

Lance knows that he's closer to a well-oiled machine. He knows that there's a life force within Keith, something maybe supernatural, a light lit bright inside of him that won't soon burn out.

A lion muzzled still has the fangs behind tightly-clamped jowls. Lance wonders how terribly Keith could mangle him. He wonders why these thoughts make him feel more curious than terrified. He wonders if Shiro is worried that Keith still hasn't come home.

Keith finishes cleaning himself off. Lance drains the tub, wipes away the lingering mess. And only once he convinces Keith to dry himself off with a hand towel, does the spell over them seem broken.

They're two boys in an undersized bathroom, once again. They're two people standing way too close, way too intimate for how little they actually know about each other.

He clears his throat, putting as much distance between both of them as he can within his confines.

"Let's go back to my room."

Keith follows him without a word, but out of the corner of his eye, as Keith trails closely behind him, Lance can see him peeking around at everything that they pass. He's craning his neck to get a better look at

family photos. He's reaching out and poking various decorations and forgotten toys that are littered about the halls. At one point, Lance hears him bump his foot against a plastic children's piano that titters its music box sounds at the force of it. But he doesn't remind him to be quiet, for some reason. He feels as though he's watching a toddler walk for the very first time. He feels like, if he were to reprimand Keith now, he'd be putting an end to Keith's curiosity in the face of something that, strangely enough, he seems completely unaccustomed to.

Lance doesn't know if Keith knows what toys are. It's a weird thought to have—a strange realization that perhaps someone else might not have the same childhood experiences that built him.

He's nearly silent as he creaks open his bedroom door. He can't feel Keith behind him, but he knows that he's there—if history has taught him anything, if all of the experiences that he's had over the last month have trained him to expect one thing from Keith, it's that he won't ever be able to feel Keith's presence, no matter how close he lingers.

So he steps into his room, throws a teasing, *"You can come in here too,"* over his shoulder, which Keith scoffs at, and he asks him to close the door as he makes a straight line over to his bed and sits down. When he turns his eyes back on Keith, he feels as though the air has been knocked out of his lungs. Keith looks somehow even stranger in the darkness of his bedroom—illuminated only by the desk lamp that he always forgets to turn off in the morning, lingering in his doorway with his hands once again shoved in his pockets.

In the past, Hunk and his girlfriend have been the only people who have ever frequented Lance's bedroom, apart from family. They've never stayed here longer than a few minutes, to wait for Lance to grab something that he forgot, or to help him collect books for studying, or any other random item that he might have needed to stop home for. It's not a big enough space for company, and this complex does nothing but depress him, even on the brighter, sunnier days of spring.

And he's not used to inviting people in here, for that very same reason. He never would have dreamed of bringing a date home. He isn't even sure why, if he wanted to impress Keith or gain his trust, he'd choose such an intimate yet unimpressive place at all.

But seeing Keith here now sends warmth rushing over his skin. He wonders, under less peculiar circumstances—if they'd met in college,

if they'd met at work, if they were normal people in a better place, living happier lives—if this would be the moment that Lance had been waiting for. If they'd kiss, or they'd talk. If he'd be alive with nerves and not feeling suddenly, once again, in some kind of trance.

Keith takes a moment to gaze around his bedroom—at the small amount of clothing piled in his laundry basket, at the movies on the shelf next to the door, the posters tacked on the walls, the family photos sitting next to Lance on the nightstand. He hesitates before taking a single, tentative step forward. Lance watches him in silence, takes in how timid he seems now, how out of his element he seems to be, in a place like this, so enclosed and so brighter lit than any other place that Lance has ever seen him.

Finally, he takes another step, and Lance pats the spot next to him on the mattress. Keith bites his lip, glancing back and forth one last time before coming forward and taking a seat next to him—as far away on the mattress as he can possibly sit.

"So," Lance says, leaving his mouth in a small "o" shape as he allows the end of that word to spread out, taper off, "So you, uh… I just… I think I'm just gonna come out and say it, if that's… okay. Y'know, just… not beat around the bush anymore."

Keith isn't looking at him, and instead focuses his gaze on the small pile of children's books on Lance's floor. *Where the Wild Things Are* is strewn off some ways away from the rest of the pile, *Green Eggs and Ham* shines in its special-edition, holographic-cover glory in the dim light of Lance's lamp. Some Christmas titles have been mixed in, too, given the quickly-approaching holiday—but it seems that Keith is focused mainly on an older title, one that Lance remembers his sister buying just before his niece was born in the fall, almost a decade ago.

My Friend the Monster isn't a literary masterpiece by any means, but it's the story that has perhaps taught his young relatives the most valuable and convenient lesson of all. He's heard his sister's friends—all young parents as well—complaining about their children's unquellable fear of what lives in their closets and under their beds. He remembers vaguely, from his own childhood, begging his father to check his room before he turned off the lights and tucked him in.

But his niece and nephews have never been afraid of the unknown in such a way—and he wonders if maybe it runs in the family, more than he can credit it to some silly children's book. But the plotline is one

that his relatives love nonetheless: a field guide, of sorts, explaining all of the different Hollywood monsters in layman's terms, comparing them to a mythical beast that the protagonist and narrator has apparently befriended.

He imagines that it's probably more about not judging a book by its cover than not being afraid of what goes bump in the night, but his niece used to love to tell him all about which monster she'd want to be her best friend, and he always used to argue with her, playfully, if only to give her the opportunity to talk more about everything that she adored in her favorite bedtime story.

"The werewolf? Really? He'd get hair all over the house! I bet he smells too!"

She'd laugh, and she'd tell him that they'd just have to give the werewolf a haircut and a bath.

"Not the sea monster! Where would you keep him? Our bathtub isn't big enough!"

She'd tell him that they could get an inflatable pool. And he'd neglect to mention that the water would be too cold in this town. An inflatable pool would kill the grass that she so-loved to play in. And it would be lonely, he'd thought, to be the only one of his kind among humans. To feel, outside of the house, outside of a society that he surely couldn't connect to completely, as though no one else in existence could ever understand him.

She'd been too young to learn those lessons back then, and anyway, her love of the sea monster had been fleeting at best.

It had been followed by zombies, then ghosts, then the wolfman again. She'd argued her reasoning for all of them in childish terms, until they'd reached the vampire.

"The vampire? Who wants to be friends with a stinky vampire? He's gotta drink a lot of blood, where are you gonna get it?"

She'd screwed up her face then, putting her tiny hand to her chin. It had taken her a moment to formulate a proper rebuttal, and when she'd turned those big, innocent eyes up at him, he hadn't been able to stop himself from shivering at the memory of it, branded in his brain, when he'd told the story of how absolutely creepy she'd sounded when he'd seen his sister the next day.

She'd told him, even and uninhibited, no remorse or disgust whatsoever:

"We could feed him bad people. If someone is mean to you, the vampire could just eat them! No one would miss bad people anyway!"

Lance doesn't want to think about this anymore.

So, instead, he clears his throat, taking a deep breath before continuing his sentence where he'd left off.

"Y—you're not human, right? You're… something else."

Keith looks at him slowly, his wild hair falling into those deep, black eyes. There are no discernible emotions on his face, no clue as to what might be roiling in his thoughts. And Lance is familiar with this feeling. He's familiar with this sensation of feeling as though he's being delved into, as though Keith is somehow picking through his thoughts, as though he knows everything that there is to know about him.

Lance can't stare back at him for very long. He tears his gaze away, but then it settles on that book again, with all of those suddenly very unsettling memories, and he forces it onto the posters on the wall across from him instead.

"I-I mean… I know it's crazy, right? I've never believed in anything supernatural before, but I feel like… there's just so much about you that doesn't add up. Like… do you know that no one but me knows that you're here? I-I mean, besides Shiro, I guess—but even Shiro is super weird, and I—I mean, he's… he's great. He's a really nice guy, and I probably don't have to tell you that he's handsome—"

He cuts himself off with a nervous laugh, rubbing the back of his neck as heat rises under his skin. He's painfully aware of the fact that he never took off his coat, and Keith didn't take his off either—but then he's wondering if Keith is wearing anything under the coat at all, if maybe, he were to suggest it, Keith would for some reason agree to undress and find himself sitting here completely naked—

He chokes on the spit in his throat, his cheeks burning. He doesn't even dare to look back in Keith's direction. He dreads the confusion and perhaps even disgust that he might find there.

"You're right." Keith's voice jars him out of his racing thoughts, grounding him suddenly to the profound reality that he's hearing

something so dangerous and so game-changing, and he's squandering this experience by allowing himself to wallow in his own embarrassment. "I'm not human. But I'm not the same as Shiro."

Lance, without thinking, finds himself looking back at Keith. Keith himself is gazing at the book again, and for whatever reason, as though drawn forward by some innate instinct of his to give Keith everything that he wants, once again, Lance leans down and grabs it from the floor.

"I… I read to my sister's kids sometimes," he says slowly, settling just a little bit closer to Keith and placing the book in his lap, "They really like this one. They really like monsters."

He bites his tongue almost immediately. Keith doesn't react, but he frets internally over whether or not "monster" could be considered a derogatory term for someone in Keith's position.

But Keith only continues looking at the glossy cover of that book, until, after moments pass in silence, Lance gently flips open the cover of it.

Lance isn't sure what compels him to read it, too. Or what urges him to turn the book in the same sideways angle that he often does with his nephews. They like to see the pictures as he reads, he knows, but he imagines that Keith can probably do both just fine.

Even still, something about this slows the rapid beating of his heart, something about going through familiar motions in a startlingly unfamiliar situation makes him feel more at ease. So he reads the short sentences from each page, taking a moment to give Keith a chance to study each illustration before moving on to the next passage.

"My best friend is a monster, but you'll never guess what he is."

The first illustration is of a small boy in blue and white spotted pajamas, standing alone with a small, red blanket in one hand. He's in a shadowed bedroom, one finger to his mouth as though to shush the reader. Behind him, glowing eyes can be seen from a blackened closet.

"He's not a werewolf, who howls at the moon, he's not the sea monster who lives in the lagoon. He's isn't the boogeyman, who goes bump in the night. He isn't a zombie who will give you a fright…"

He reads through the redundant list of various ghouls, reciting the list

more from memory than actually focusing on the words on the page. But midway through, just as he finishes reading about “the witch with her spooky black cat”, Keith’s hand creeps forward, startling him so suddenly out of his daze that he jerks back. His heart clattered wildly in his chest.

Keith, too, seems alarmed by his reaction, but he barely moves at all. He only pauses, pulling his gaze to Lance’s face with slightly wider eyes.

“What is that one supposed to be?”

His finger is poised on the page, pressed lightly over the fanged, smiling face of “the vampire who turns into a bat”. Lance feels his voice tittering in his throat, caught between explaining things to Keith and choking on everything else that threatens to come tumbling out. He drags in a shaky breath, biting hard on his bottom lip as Keith continues to focus that unyielding, empty gaze on the water paint illustrations on the page. His nails, Lance notices, are caked undeath with something thick and black. They’re short enough—cut almost all the way down to the skin. And his skin, itself, seems so smooth that it’s almost poreless. He seems to be sitting here even more still than he seemed from far away—as though he isn’t breathing. As though there’s no reason for his body to move in a natural, *human* way at all.

It causes an eerie chill to shiver up Lance’s spine. He feels now, the belated regret and overwhelming terror that might have saved him from his untimely death here. Suddenly, he doesn’t know why he once thought that getting closer to Keith was such a good idea at all.

“I—It’s a vampire, see—uh… it says, “it’s not the vampire, who turns into a bat”, so… so, you know… like, Dracula? Or Nosferatu? Or, Count Chocula, or uh… Count von… Count... “

He feels like an idiot for even considering those last two, but he’s running frightfully low on vampire media icons to explain this any clearer to Keith. And Keith is looking at him as though he’s grown a second head—tearing his hand back as though the paper has burned him and tucking it back into his coat pocket with the other.

He’s tilting his head to the side, his mouth agape just enough that Lance can see those sharp canines between his lips. He looks like a doll, even more than before. He looks so perfect that Lance can’t imagine that he’s possibly real.

“Count… what?”

Lance feels as though his brain has just sputtered and stalled. It takes him a few moments too long to regain his bearings coherently enough to even consider what Keith has just asked of him.

“I mentioned two Counts,” He says, ignoring Keith’s quiet accusation that he clearly said “count” three times, “Count Chocula is like a cereal… guy… He’s the mascot for chocolate cereal, and Count von Count, um… he counts.”

Keith bites his bottom lip, furrowing his brows and shaking his head once, then twice, back and forth. Lance isn’t entirely sure what sort of person has never heard of *Sesame Street* , but he wonders if this is a battle that he’s just not fated to win.

“Vampires, you know? Have you seriously never heard of a vampire before? You know, they suck blood, they burn up in the sun, and they can’t… come into your house unless… you…”

He allows that sentence to trail off into silence.

Keith’s eyes feel like ice cubes melting against his skin. He sits, staring at the smiling picture of the vampire in his niece’s book, wondering how anyone could be so disconnected as to have never heard of one before, wondering if Keith has never watched television or read a book, or found himself influenced or connected to the ideas and creations of other living, breathing people ever before.

Lance’s fingers trace over the lines on the page. He wonders if he should just keep reading, or if maybe that would be the worst thing to do in this particular situation. His line of sight wanders from the book to the floor—to Keith’s pearly feet pressed against the hardwood, to the empty space where Lance knows that he should be casting a shadow. He mulls over that for a moment, feels something strange settling into the hollow of his chest. This sensation now, akin to a dream—he feels as though he should reasonably be horrified. He feels as though the normal version of himself, who actually thinks before he acts, *that* Lance wouldn’t have invited a stranger into his room, into his house, onto his bed.

Nerves bundle just under his skin. A warm flush works up under his cheeks.

Keith’s lips are parted, when Lance looks back to him. In the quiet, he can barely make out a gurgling that he belatedly realizes must be Keith’s hungry belly, begging for food.

“A-are you hungry?” He asks, so rushed that the words all crash together, and he worries for a chilling second that he might have just squawked nonsense at this beautiful, ethereal boy in front of him and ruined any chance that he might have had of ever figuring him out, “We have, uh… I mean, we had spaghetti for dinner, and I know it’s not very good reheated, but I learned this trick; if you put a piece of bread in the microwave with it, the noodles don’t come out as soggy as they would if you didn—”

“I don’t eat things like that.”

Keith neither confirms nor denies his hunger, but he’s not looking anywhere near Lance anymore. His hands are back in his pockets, his expression tight and guarded. Lance imagines, if Keith seemed capable of holding color in that perfect skin, he might be flushing right now. Lance can tell from the bulges of his pockets that he must be wringing his hands together, and he realizes—perhaps the most mundane discovery that could possibly excite him about Keith—that each pocket must connect in the middle.

And he’s thinking about this, and nothing else. He’s thinking about what the coat must have looked like when Keith got it—if it was a gift from Shiro or some other suitor, if Shiro and Keith really are dating and Keith was just lying about them being nothing but friends.

Then, why Keith would lie about something like that, when Shiro is so clearly gorgeous, so clearly kind, and so clearly willing to do anything for Keith, no matter what it takes.

His head is swirling with a dozen thoughts at once. He’s dizzied by them, grasping desperately at the tendril of one, only to be distracted by something else.

And he doesn’t know why he does what he does next, and why he does so without thinking about it. He doesn’t know what force compels him to pull back his own coat sleeve, to offer Keith his arm with his wrist facing upwards to the dark ceiling.

In the dim light of the lamp, he can see the deep blue of his veins under the thin surface of his skin. And Keith’s eyes are immediately on them—like a hawk closing in on a sprinting hare. Like a spider reaching out to wrap a fly in its unbreakable web.

Keith heaves a deep, shuddering breath. His gaze catches Lance’s, and Lance feels as though he’s existing not here, but in a dream space just outside of his own skin.

The feral, animalistic version of himself begs his body to run. To hide his veins, his blood, the pulsing center of his life. He's prey now, belly up. He's given up before Keith has even made a move to kill him.

Keith licks his lips, and his eyes are begging.

Begging for what, Lance isn't sure, but he doesn't move to sink his teeth into Lance's wrist. He seems as though he's holding himself back, and as though it's taking every ounce of his strength to do so.

"I—I can't—"

"It's food, right? What difference could it possibly make who you eat? What's the difference between humans to you?"

The spell is abruptly broken. Keith's eyes widen, his jaw goes slack. Lance flounders in the realization that he's just said something very, very wrong—implied something about Keith that he'd never actually think of him, even after only meeting him a few times.

Keith didn't attack him right away. Keith has apparently kept Shiro around for a very long time.

He's obviously not a mindless murdering machine that doesn't think before he eats. There's evidently far more to all of this than Lance could have ever considered.

Lance fumbles over an apology, pulls back his arm and clutches tightly, instead, to the book still in his lap. His face feels as though it's on fire now, and Keith is trembling with something that might be anger, might be embarrassment, or it might be the sheer amount of effort that it's taking for him not to take Lance's offer, after he's put himself on such a silver platter.

Before Lance can shove his foot any further into his mouth, before he can remedy this situation or make an attempt at either thing, Keith is shoving up from the bed, heading straight for the door.

"This wasn't a very good date," He throws behind him, wrenching open the door and disappearing around the corner into the hall faster than Lance can even react.

Lance lets him go, clutches the book tight in his lap. He hesitates just long enough that he can hear the front door creaking open and clicking shut. Then quickly, so fast that blood rushes to his head, he's on his feet, snapping the book closed, tucking it under one arm, and

rushing out after Keith.

He's as quick as he can be while still maintaining a certain level of respectful stealth. And when he slides through the entryway onto the welcome mat, he's surprised to see Keith still lingering at the balcony, looking over onto the stairwell below.

"I—I'm sorry," Lance huffs, adrenaline pumping through his veins, feet slipping on the icy walkway, as he clamors closer to Keith's back, "I—I don't know what I did, but… If I offended you, I… I didn't—"

Keith turns to him, his dark eyes, his white skin, the deep hollow of his cheeks bathed in moonlight knocking the breath straight from Lance's lungs. His eyes are glassy, his lips open, his chest heaving with breaths that Lance isn't sure that he even has to take.

And he speaks then, in a voice cracked with an emotion that Lance can't understand, "Why do you care so much what I think of you?"

Lance tremors in the early morning cold. He shakes with a resonant emotion that rings through him, a lonely, needy clamor of sensation crashing through his chest. He doesn't know *why* he needs. He doesn't know what he needs for. But he knows that he can't let Keith leave tonight without mending things between them—without making sure, once and for all, that whatever it is that's drawing him to Keith, Keith knows about it. That there's no doubt in either of their minds that this is real, and it's undeniable, and Lance isn't going to stop meddling until he gets to the bottom of every single mystery that's unfolded since Keith and Shiro first rolled in here.

"I can't stop thinking about you," Lance tells him, unabashed, for once, possessed by that familiar sensation—that familiar urge to do anything that Keith might ask of him, no matter how dangerous or outlandish or humiliating the task might be, "You and Shiro—ever since you showed up, you're all that I can think about. Something weird is going on here—something's wrong with both of you. Bad things are happening, and I can't shake the feeling that you're right in the middle of it, and I think Shiro might have done something horrible, but—but I don't care. Every time that I see you… I feel like I'm gonna die if I don't get close to you. I don't…"

He turns his gaze away. To the melted snow in the walkway. To the moon full and bright and distant in the sky. To the black night, and the pulverized street lamps. To the headlights sparkling momentarily through the gaps in the faraway trees.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but… I think you did this to me.”

When he chances a look at Keith, he’s startled by how horrified he looks. His eyes are wide, his lips pursed tightly together. His jaw is clenched, his shoulders rounded back. He looks as though, any second now, he might go bounding over that balcony railing, if only to get away.

Instead, he spits a scoff. He focuses a glare somewhere far off to his left, right into the thick black of shadowed hall.

And he sighs, long and deep. He tips back his head and closes his eyes.

“Go back inside,” he says, “Go to bed. Forget about all of this. Stop waiting around for me. Stop talking to Shiro. Don’t snoop around anymore. Just… keep your nose clean.”

And he sends Lance a final, hard look. His words are cold and firm. His gaze is so intense, so unyielding that Lance feels as though he’s being frozen down to the marrow of his bones.

“If I see you again, I’ll kill you.”

And just like that—in the blink of an eye, he’s gone. Over the railing, into the dark. He’s soundless as he bounds off into the night. When Lance peers over the railing, he can’t see even a trace of him left behind.

He’s tired, when he gives himself a moment to think about it.

And so, after a long moment of contemplation, he goes back inside, locks the door, and wanders back into his room.

And he sleeps—for the small window of time that he has left before he has to wake up to make breakfast.

On his nightstand, he keeps the book.

“He offered to let me feed from him tonight.”

Shiro pauses, resisting the urge to scratch the itch on his nose,

resisting the urge to turn around and send Keith the dirty look that he can feel spreading out over his expression.

Instead, " *Keith* ," he says—plain and curt. In the most disapproving tone that he can muster while he's elbow-deep in something and wet and pungent that he doesn't want to think about right now.

The twitching thing currently leaking into the bathtub is still warm to the touch. Shiro can feel the final, residual kicks of its nerves shuddering through it, expending the final energy of its synapses firing off in random directions, as though it could somehow pull itself out of this danger with its innards splayed out and leaking fluids down the drain.

Their bedding sits clean and dry in the doorway, and on top of it, is Keith. Shiro can't sense him, just as he's never been able to, but he can estimate where he must have settled down from the sound of his voice echoing against the walls, and the knowledge that he has of Keith as a person.

"You didn't—"

"You know I wouldn't do that."

"But why would he ever *offer* ?"

There's no answer to that for a very long time. Shiro busies himself with squeezing everything that he can from this dying creature. It isn't perfect, and he can already imagine Keith's unhappy expression when he offers him such a pathetic dinner, but Keith understands the discretion required in their position more than anyone. He agreed to this arrangement many, many years ago, and Shiro knows that he's not a man to go back on his word.

Keith will make due with the innocent creatures that Shiro manages to catch with his car. He'll bide his time until there's another accident, or a blood drive, or something chaotic and confusing that might provide the cover required for Shiro to sneak away with proper sustenance.

Shiro has watched the slow decline of Keith's appearance from the lively, healthy hues of his last good meal to the drained, paper-thin, and half-alive creature that currently rests on a pile of blankets and pillows in the threshold of the door. He's been sleeping more lately, and for longer. He's been despondent even when Shiro brings home a particularly challenging crossword for the two of them to tackle together after work.

Shiro wonders if they'll be here long enough that he should consider picking up a television from a secondhand store. He wonders if getting cable will be far too risky.

But he feels guilty for leaving Keith alone here with nothing but his hunger. He knows that it must be agonizing, to avoid doing anything that he might regret. He doesn't know how long Keith will last this time before he reaches his breaking point and makes a very big mistake.

"I think I did it again." Keith's voice is quiet, but the sound of it is so unexpected after so much silent time has passed that it startles Shiro out of his thoughts. He twitches, managing to splatter a small amount of liquid on the floor. He clicks his tongue, cursing himself internally for not being more collected. "You know, the… the same thing that I did to you. He said that he can't stop thinking about me."

After he calms down and composes himself, Shiro allows himself the opportunity to mull over Keith's words. After a moment, he laughs, craning his neck to peer at Keith through the darkness, careful not to spill any further liquid on the floor.

"You didn't do anything to me," he tells Keith, "I fell in love with you."

Keith's pursed frown tells him everything that he needs to know, even as Keith averts his eyes and refuses to say anything further. The wet, kicking thing stops kicking. He finishes collecting as much fluid as he can in Keith's favorite plastic cup.

And Keith draws nearer, like a timid animal. Like a kicked dog, unsure of if the hand reaching out to it will hurt or heal it.

But Shiro knows that something vivacious exists under that thin, white skin. He can feel the thumping of it tethered to himself—can sense the power of Keith in the way that he devours the contents of the cup.

Shiro leaves him alone after that—to do what he needs to with the carcass. He's so used to the sloppy sounds of it—to the animalistic grunts, the gnashing of teeth tearing flesh from bone in search of even the smallest ounce of blood. He's accustomed to these noises, so he tunes them out. They're no more a distraction to him as he washes the dishes than the skittering in the walls, the neighbors' television, the hum of traffic outside.

He wonders why Keith resisted the temptation of feeding from Lance.

He wonders what that might mean for both of them.

He wonders what Lance must know about them now, if he'll tell anyone, if he'll be a problem that Shiro will have to take care of later on.

He places the last dish in the rack to dry. He flips off the light in the kitchen, navigating blindly through the dark.

He used to be afraid of the shadows when he was a child. He used to beg his mother to keep the hallway light on.

Decades ago now, he thinks, he was wary of what went bump in the night. But now, he makes a bed with it.

In the bathroom, with the door closed. The smell of blood and torn flesh, the stickiness of it clinging to Keith's body—

It doesn't even bother him anymore.

Chapter End Notes

> From the intro of 'Let The Right One In', by John Ajvide Lindqvist:
>
> "I never wanted to kill.
> I am not naturally evil.
> Such things I do.
> Just to make myself
> More attractive to you.
> Have I failed?"
>
> —Morrissey, 'Last of the Famous International Playboys'

Chapter 6

The smoke in the air was so heavy that night that Shiro had felt as though it might have been a wall between two worlds.

A murky sheet of glass, perhaps, on one side of his normal existence, and Shiro, himself, positioned opposite, resting somewhere in the humming darkness of a universe that he'd found himself trapped inside of. The new reality in which he existed was darker and louder. It reeked of stale cigarettes and the bitter bite of beer, the resonant booming of bass-boosted music. The feeling of sweat and hands and bodies everywhere, of exhaustion abated only by his own adrenaline. Of something strange, almost supernatural compelling him to follow his peers into that decrepit house in that shady neighborhood—tucked away in the one strip of town that all of the locals had warned him about when he'd first moved in only weeks ago.

Shiro had never been much of a rebel. He'd never strayed from the straight-laced, conventional upbringing that had crafted him.

He'd felt, as he'd sat in that tiny, barren, broken living room among all of that smoke—as he'd stolen small, nervous glances at the man slumped next to him on the couch and those little, pale hands rested on his shoulders—as though he didn't know a single person in the entire world who would miss him if he never came back.

He'd left behind an ex boyfriend in his hometown. When he'd left for college, the two of them had split amicably. But he knew that it would be in bad taste to call that night, to ask the guy if he'd drive out to the big city for his funeral if he disappeared into the other side of a black hole, materialized mysteriously in the center of that living room.

He hadn't had any family to speak of, really. Which might have been related to the boyfriend, he wasn't really sure. He couldn't ever wrap his head around it completely. He'd had parents, once, perhaps. And then he hadn't.

He'd spent so many years trying to forget about it, that, decades later, he couldn't recall what the true cause of it might have been.

But he was alone—that night and indefinitely. The loneliness was all that had mattered. It was what must have pushed him to accept that invitation, he might think now—in the future, in a brief lapse of a moment in which his past regrets might flicker through his thoughts.

That night, Shiro had followed a few of his classmates from their evening lecture to the large, rusted, windowless van that they frequently carpooled in. He'd chatted with them over cigarettes, learned about this party, which, at the time, had seemed more than commonplace for college kids on a Friday night.

No warning alarms had sounded off in his head. He hadn't thought to ask them where the party was being held. He definitely hadn't considered asking them if anything particularly dangerous or horrible or life-ruining might take place there.

It was early January—cold enough that he was dreading heading back to his apartment, with those awful, sputtering space heaters that barely kept things warm enough to shield him from the winter cold.

He didn't like being alone there, encapsulated in the silence. The creaks and groans of an old building were the only sounds that might have reminded him that he wasn't by himself in a silent world. There were people in the city all around him. There were friendships that he could have made around every turn.

But he was still alone. He still had no friends or lovers or family. And he'd come to the conclusion, maybe long before that night, but maybe in that moment just before he'd climbed into the van, that he was lonely because something deep inside of him was irreparably broken.

He was the problem. He didn't get out enough. He'd put up too many walls. He was strange and hard to understand, and he wasn't interesting or funny or particularly attractive.

He had little to offer other people, he understood. And so, despite how late it was, how tired he was, how he didn't know any of his classmates well enough to recite their names from memory, he'd agreed to come along. He'd imagined that maybe it would put an end to the loneliness. Perhaps, if he extended some amount of effort, he could make friends with them.

He might keep them at arm's distance, but at least he wouldn't be by himself. At least, when push came to shove, he could rely on a few shallow friendships to drag him through the monotony of his difficult classes, his stressful job, and the long nights spent alone in an empty, leaky apartment in a not-so-great part of the city. He could finally shed the tethers that kept him separated from all of the other people around him. Even if it wasn't perfect, at least he wouldn't be lonely.

He'd told himself that it was good enough to be invited along. He'd

thought, at the time, that at least he wouldn't have to spend the night kept company only by the creaks and groans of the rusted pipes in the walls.

The night had been black and starless. The street lamps blipping by as he'd ridden in the passenger's seat had blinded him from the moon, the clouds, or anything discernible in all of that dark.

He'd felt disoriented, unable to comprehend the landmarks that had led him down that narrow, cracked road, over that uneven terrain. He hadn't even realized that they were bringing him to the more unsavory part of town until they'd pulled in front of their destination and he'd noticed the sorry state of that overgrown front yard.

The siding of the house itself was cracked and peeling. Large pieces of paint were hanging from the rotting wood like dying leaves. The chain link fence wrapped around the yard was slumped in places, rusted and sagging down as though someone might have stomped on it. The sidewalk, which must have once been solid concrete, was so destroyed by the time that he'd tiptoed carefully over it that the soles of his shoes met mainly melted snow and brown grass.

Inside, through curtains as thin and threadbare as cheese cloth, he saw the dim, flashing lights of the party. Even from the curb where his classmate parked the van, he could hear the music thumping from an oversized, overpriced boombox in the living room.

As a med student, he'd thought that maybe he should keep his nose clean.

As a coward and a homebody, he'd considered that maybe this was too dangerous and he didn't want to get himself into any trouble.

But Shiro, twenty-five for the first time, had thought, in that moment, that he would only live once—he'd only experience himself at that age for a brief flash of time. This youth, his life, it would be there, then gone, like a flame put out in the night. Like the wax melting down in a candle. Like a long breath, then nothing. Then darkness, and whatever came after.

He had no way of knowing how many times he would be twenty-five, after that night.

He had no understanding of the spider's web that he was toeing so dangerously.

So he'd followed his classmates into that house, nodded at their reassurances that this particular place was safe, it was fine, and their professors would be none the wiser come Monday. He'd filed through that rickety door with all five of them—lost them immediately in the confusion of that thick cloud of smoke, the loud voices, the feeling of sweat and warmth and skin all around him, writhing in the dark.

Shiro told himself that he'd hang near the walls, he might mingle with anyone who seemed sober. He'd drink only things that came in safely-sealed bottles and cans. He wouldn't let his guard down. He wouldn't become yet another statistic of mortality in this impoverished place, in this big city, in this depressing drag of a year.

Earlier that morning, he'd learned about the case of an old man who'd had a heart attack while driving to his granddaughter's house. He'd careened into the playground of an elementary school. One dozen dead. They'd learned about the abrupt ending of life. They'd learned about spotting the warning signs early on.

Shiro had thought that life and death was nothing but a chemical reaction. He'd thought that the only true God might have been things that kept a person alive and things that killed them. He didn't imagine that there was room for the supernatural to exist somewhere in between. He didn't believe in ghosts or fairy tales.

He wasn't the sort of person who interesting things ever happened to.

That old man had died because his heart was sick. He'd visited a doctor for chest pains earlier in the week, but he hadn't gotten the care that he'd needed.

The lesson wasn't about a deity smiting him because of some moral misstep. It wasn't about mourning the young children who'd died too, or trying to understand what it all had meant.

To Shiro, a lesson like that made perfect sense. Open and shut, a sick man needed help and he didn't get it. Bad things happened. He needed to be vigilant in the future, to avoid making those same mistakes all over again.

But later that night, he'd sat alone on a torn and worn down couch in the middle of a dark, hazy living room. He listened to a mix tape of David Bowie songs on an endless repeat nearly four times through before he wondered if he should find a phone somewhere and call himself a cab.

He thought about the supernatural only while he lamented the way that the smoke hung in the air like a ghost. The way that his eyes could never focus on anything in the dark. How calm he'd felt then, as though he was under the influence himself. How he'd felt, in that moment, as though he was somehow exactly where he needed to be.

There was a couple sitting beside him—a man slumped forward with his back to Shiro and someone else with their small, white hands grasped at his shoulders. They seemed as though they might have passed out mid-makeout, and he wondered if they knew each other. He found himself focusing on those tiny fingers, the black dirt caked under the nails. They were too blemishless and pristine, as though they were made of porcelain, as though they had no pores or follicles even for hair.

Like plastic, he'd found himself thinking, but maybe it was just a trick of the darkness. Maybe David Bowie's endless drawl was getting into his head. Maybe he was too dizzy from the smoke. He was drunk off of whatever was hanging in the air.

The calm receded. He felt suddenly overwhelmed with emotion—terrified, for reasons that he couldn't put his finger on. Regretful and just ready to put all of this behind him and go home. He rose, instead of lingering there and staring at those people for any longer.

He didn't know why the sight of them disgusted him. He didn't know why two people wrapped around each other at a party like this made him feel as though something unnatural was going on.

But he rose quickly, stumbled with the swiftness that he'd pushed himself up and off of the couch. He'd turned his head in a foolish moment of weakness, and he watched the hand shudder and jerk downward, pulling the unconscious person on top of it further down.

He could barely make out dark hair curled and brassy just at the dip of that man's shoulder. It was a peculiar sight, as though the smaller person was kissing down his neck, to his chest, as though they still didn't know that he wasn't awake anymore.

But the man was moved about bonelessly, like a rag doll. Shiro felt profoundly, before he managed to tear his eyes away, as though he was watching a nature documentary. As though this tiny, pallid person was somehow a buzzard tearing flesh from the carcass of indiscernible roadkill.

He stumbled outside. The porch light had been shattered. He

wondered if it was a bullet or a baseball bat. He wondered how dangerous it was to find himself standing on that porch so late at night and so alone, so tangled between two universes—the reality of his stressful, lonely life, and the dream state that he'd just managed to pull himself out of.

The crisp air felt nice, at least. His lit cigarette gradually relieved his bundled nerves.

He watched the smoke rising into the dark. He willed down the sudden, swift pounding of his heart.

The porch itself was a single block of concrete just big enough for two or three people to occupy at once. There was no handrail to rest on, so instead, he lowered himself to the ledge, resting his shoes in the frosty, overgrown grass. He'd peered over into the thick darkness of the neighbor's yard, and he realized, with much confusion, that every porch light along the entire stretch of the street seemed to be broken.

It must have been kids with BB guns. It must have been someone trying to pull some kind of prank.

He couldn't imagine that it could be an accident or a coincidence. He couldn't figure out how they managed to get just the light, when upon inspection, it seemed that the house itself was free of dents or fresh holes.

He remembered from his childhood that teenagers would often drive down quiet neighborhoods with baseball bats and bludgeon unassuming people's mailboxes. He'd thought, for a moment, that perhaps some sort of sharpshooter miscreant had pointed their toy guy from the window of a moving car and taken out all of the lights along the way.

It didn't seem likely, but he couldn't think of a single other reason why. In this sort of place, the risk of attracting attention by wandering onto strangers' porches was amplified by the danger of it—the common knowledge that each of the locals must have shared, that anyone sleeping behind those front doors might have welcomed them with violence.

He thought then that maybe it was just a power outage, but then he spotted the shattered glass of the light under his feet in the yard. For whatever reason, the mere idea of this caused anxiety to roil inside of him. From inside, he could still feel the vibration of the music, could hear the now familiar lyrics muffled through the walls. He rested the

side of his head against the chipped and paint-faded siding. He wondered why he ever thought that it would be a good idea to go to a place like this, with people who he barely knew at all.

Maybe he'd thought that a change of scenery would be good for him. Maybe he just wanted to pretend that he was a normal young person, capable of letting loose and having some fun.

But it was apparent then, that it wasn't a well thought out plan. It wasn't even what he'd remotely considered to be a good idea. It had already been an hour, and he'd lost track of everyone who he'd come there with. They'd disappeared into the smoke, into the noise and the music, the stink of drugs. The hazy bite of alcohol, the disorienting blur of many people doing many things around him, all melding together into a thick wall of confusion.

He considered walking home, but he knew that it was a bad idea. And as he was mentally checking off his choices, the door next to him creaked open. As he glanced at the new-arriving guest, he was momentarily thrown off by the sight of bare, filthy feet. A single one pressed out into the cold night air. Nearly black-padded, caked with melted snow and mud. The skin itself, beneath, seemed just as immaculate and borderline doll-like as the hand had been in the house. He immediately connected those dots, shoving down his nervousness, convincing himself fretfully that anything strange in this situation could be explained away easily with science in place of the supernatural.

He smiled, despite his quivering fear. He raised his cigarette in a small wave, greeting his new company lightly with a short, "Need some fresh air too?"

The door slammed closed behind them, as though they'd lost their grip on it before they managed to be more gentle and quiet. He was greeted then with the wide, black eyes and the panicked frown of a person who seemed to think that they'd been caught in the act of… *something* .

He furrowed his brows, leaning further in.

This person—this boy—he seemed to be wearing nothing but a filthy, oversized t-shirt that draped down to his knees. The shirt hung off of him loosely, dotted with black and brown and long-faded crimson, stained in so many places that Shiro couldn't be entirely sure what its original color might have been. His hair was a mess—shiny with

grease, matted in places. It was a wild, untamable thing that curled into his eyes, framed his face in thick, frizzy billows of darkness caked together with the same filth that the rest of his body seemed to be sealed in. His cheeks were so pallid and hollow that he seemed akin to a skeleton simply draped in that strange, poreless skin.

His eyes, so dark and intense that Shiro had to force himself to look away. He felt, after he turned his gaze to the black of the neighbors' unkempt yards, as though something might have reached inside of him and squeezed his pounding heart, his aching lungs, the frozen marrow in his suddenly so breakable bones.

He felt a feral sort of panic. He felt animalistic in that moment—like a rabbit sprinting from the open muzzle of a hungry fox. Like a mouse pawing the metal edges of a trap in search of delicious, poison food.

Shiro didn't like feeling tempted, but terrified. If he wanted something, he didn't know what it was. What that wanting might have been for. He forced out a shaky breath, and it hung as fog in the air. That boy, he realized, left no indication of breath hanging from his lips. But he watched Shiro—stared at him for longer than a normal person might look at someone else without speaking to them. Without blinking. Without breathing in or out.

They stood together in silence for what felt like an eternity.

And Shiro waited—for something that he didn't want to name. He felt sick to his stomach then, zapped of his energy. He just wanted to go home.

"You don't belong here."

The voice, no inflection. The words felt like submerging himself in a bath of ice.

But when Shiro jerked his head up once again—in the desperate hope of finding some meaning in those words, some good reason for this stranger to be speaking to him in such certain terms, the boy was gone.

At first, Shiro could find no trace of him, no indication of where he'd gone. But after a moment of staring through the dark, through the haze of his adrenaline awakening him from his exhaustion, he spotted one single tell. One tiny piece of evidence left behind to prove to himself that he hadn't just hallucinated the entire thing.

Stained into the porous concrete slat of the porch, there were three thick, black dots. Metallic, dark, familiar in a way that made his skin crawl.

Shiro didn't dare investigate.

When he went back inside, the rubbery, lifeless body of that man was still slumped over on the couch. Unmoving, too still to be sleeping. Too quiet and formless to be breathing.

Shiro didn't dare try to rouse him, and it seemed as though the party itself was ebbing away into the drug-fueled exhaustion that left him practically alone in a house full of ghosts. He felt a surge of responsibility that he pointedly ignored. Instead, he scrambled into the kitchen to find the landline—the cord tangled and gnarled thin. The receiver hanging loose and swinging free of the basket.

He frantically called himself a cab. He told himself that the man would be okay. Those people would be okay. He wasn't supposed to take care of them. He wasn't even supposed to be there at all.

He went home and he slept fitfully. In his dreams, that night and for days later, he couldn't shake the sensation of dark eyes watching, a weight, heavy on his chest. Cold, smooth, plastic fingers pressed into his throat and threatening to squeeze.

He felt marked for death. He felt branded by something dark and terrible that he didn't understand.

But, like with many other things in his life, he convinced himself that if he ignored it, eventually, it would go away.

When his peers asked later on where he'd gone, why he'd left so soon, he told them that he'd started to feel sick. They'd seemed perturbed then. They'd asked him if he'd seen a man slumped over on the couch —if he'd noticed him taking any drugs, or talking to anyone suspicious.

Shiro had made a decision then. He'd decided to stay quiet. He hadn't mentioned the boy or the music, or the smoke in the air. He didn't tell them about those hands with the dirty fingernails, or the bare feet, or the break that he'd taken to smoke outside.

He told them that he'd left too soon to really see anyone. They'd all shuffled uncomfortably. They'd told him—hushed and uncertain, uncomfortable and fidgety during a quiet moment just before the

beginning of class—about how the host of the party had discovered that man dead in the same spot the next morning. No one had tried to wake him up throughout the night. No one had even seemed to notice that he was there at all.

The police had thought at first that it was an overdose, but there were no signs of toxins in his system. In fact, they'd informed him, there hadn't been any blood to test at all.

No fingerprints. No indication of how he'd possibly bled to death and left no traces behind but three droplets on the porch.

Someone had murdered him in plain sight—is what they'd told him. A murderer, it seemed, had been creeping through their party completely undetected.

He'd pretended to be surprised.

And after that day, he couldn't stop thinking about the boy with the perfect skin, with the bare legs, with the black eyes. He couldn't stop seeing him in his dreams, his nightmares, his fleeting moments of downtime during classes and his part time job.

And gradually, around every corner.

But only late at night, and only when no one else could see him.

"So you and Keith, you've, uh… you've known each other for a long time."

Shiro pauses as he flicks the ash from his cigarette, turning to Lance with a quiet, coy smile tugging at the corners of his lips. Lance feels his cheeks growing warmer, and he can't help but move his gaze away from Shiro's own dark eyes—but he isn't sure if it's because he's just asked an obviously stupid question, or if maybe Shiro is just really too handsome for his own good.

Two days before Christmas, the two of them are standing together at three in the morning, just outside of Shiro's building as he enjoys his after-work smoke. It's snowing again. Shiro commented earlier about how he hasn't seen snow on Christmas in many, many years. It's nice,

he claims, to be able to listen to the carols and actually be living it. It seems to Lance that he hasn't quite become disillusioned yet, and he wonders if it would be cruel to inform him that it will probably snow for another five or six months.

Florida, Lance remembers, is where they've traveled from this time. He's aware of the pathetic gray sludge that they call "snow" there. He remembers reading something about it online.

Hunk frequently brings in travel brochures to work, as though he'll ever find the time or funds to go anywhere. He'd talked about Florida frequently, one mild summer just a few years ago. He'd told Lance that it was a more achievable dream—that the two of them could road trip down, despite Lance's very reasonable argument that he, himself, had no vehicle, and Hunk only owned the moped.

But Hunk had told him all about the winters there. He'd cited it as a good reason to visit.

"Dude, we could probably go to Disneyland in the winter and not even be cold! I mean, it gets down to, what, forty degrees there at the coldest? Isn't it like twenty outside right now?"

It was still too chilly for Lance's tastes, but he'd humored Hunk for awhile. He wonders now if maybe Shiro and Keith had been there during that time. If perhaps they would have crossed paths, had Hunk and himself ever managed to collect the funds to go.

And if he'd be alive now to spend this moment with Shiro, had he ever happened to meet him before this.

Personally, privately, he thinks that a warm holiday season would be a welcome break from the perpetual cold of this town. He makes a point to ignore every other path that his thoughts are threatening to stray down, concentrating instead on how desperately he'd love to be anywhere but here, and how confusing it continues to be that Shiro would choose to come here when he could go literally anywhere else.

But he can tell that Shiro is nostalgic for the snow, and he wonders where he must have come from originally, that he's so used to it.

He'd felt guilty, in that moment, for disagreeing about something that Shiro was obviously so passionate about, and so he put his foot in his mouth with that other inane question instead of accidentally offending him by mentioning how awful of a place he'd recently moved to.

But Shiro, to his credit, isn't antagonizing him now. He's only looking out into the night sky, enjoying his smoke, and seemingly contemplating all of the ways that he can respond to Lance without giving too much away.

Lance, lately, hasn't seen Keith since the night that they spent together a little under a week ago. He hasn't caught even a hint of him, even when he's waited pathetically for hours and hours in the playground, skimming through the darkness helplessly in search of even the slightest movement. He hasn't noticed anything strange sans a few more broken street lamps, hasn't read anything in the papers about any other missing townsfolk.

But that hasn't stopped him from thinking about Keith. The words that Keith had spoken to him that night, that strange sort of command that Lance had felt compelling him to bed, instead of chasing after Keith how he might have wanted to.

He'd thought that it might be stronger than it's turned out to be—Keith's unusual vampire love spell that he'd been so sure was the cause of his own recently outlandish behavior. He'd been determined that, if he could catch Keith demanding that he do something and find no good reason to actually do it, maybe he could settle once and for all with the knowledge that he's been nothing but another victim in all of this—like Shiro. Like surely many other people had been in the past.

But Keith had seemed incredibly serious when he'd told him to stay away. And Lance had felt a feeble force compelling him to do just what Keith wanted. Despite it, however, Lance had discovered very soon after that there were no repercussions for going against Keith's wishes. He hadn't suffered when he'd sat outside and waited for Keith the very next night. He hadn't even felt remotely guilty about it.

He's met with the haunting reality that perhaps Keith's magical powers or prevailing seductive aura can't actually make him do anything that he doesn't want to.

So he can't blame it, as he has in the past, for the strange way that he's been acting as of late. The realization that he might have cleaned up Shiro's crime scene just because he's a very sick person with an obviously skewed moral compass sits heavily in the pits of his belly.

And he wants to ask about it, because a part of him might have suspected before that Shiro was a victim, too. That he was being mind

controlled, that maybe he wouldn't have moved around or hurt people or lived this limited life if Keith hadn't ensnared him in his web somehow. A part of him had thought, before, that he was only feeling so drawn to Keith because Keith might have wanted to eat him.

But Keith had rebuffed him, and he'd told him to stay away. He'd seemed horrified by Lance's invitation to suck his blood—which, given all of the new information that he's learned, is even weirder of a thing to do than it had seemed before. Maybe Keith was turned off by how strange he is too, somehow, because now it seems that Keith is avoiding him. He's stayed well hidden in the shadows that used to seem as though they were opening up for him. He's laying low after commanding for Lance to keep his distance.

Keith himself is playing the role of someone who absolutely doesn't want anything to do with Lance anymore quite dutifully. Lance isn't sure if there's ever been a piece of vampire-related media in which the human protagonist seeks out an unwitting vampire in a ploy for love deserving of a restraining order. He doesn't know if there's any ancient text that might tell him what to do in this very unique situation.

Regardless of how definite it seems that Keith is finished with him after he'd accidentally offended him, Lance just can't seem to let it go. He doesn't feel that force drawing him to Keith anymore, and he hasn't seen him lurking where he used to feel as though Keith might have existed everywhere. He feels now, blind and deaf and exiled from a world that's closed its doors to him. And it's apparent, undeniably so, that whatever hold Keith has on him extends only far enough to catch his attention. Now that Keith wants nothing to do with him, even that small push in the right direction has completely faded away.

And now, whatever he chooses to do about that…

It's all on him.

He isn't sure how he feels about the fact that Shiro is apparently, allegedly, a murderer. Just for the sake of killing. For a boy who maybe isn't even his boyfriend, for the benefit of some monster who keeps him at arm's length, too. He isn't even sure if Keith counts as a vampire, or what in the world he could possibly be if not. He'd always thought that the reality of such beasts might be somehow more romantic. Shiro, he thinks, fits the role more than Keith does. At least Shiro is charming. At least he seems as though he wants literally

anything to do with other people.

Lance can't imagine how Keith must have fared before Shiro came along and helped him. Maybe he pushed people away enough that they just threw themselves at his feet. Maybe he creeped them out enough that they died of fright.

Maybe there's more to him than the limited view that Lance has been provided so far—some deeper meaning to all of this. Some reason why Shiro would obviously be driven so willingly to murder for the sake of someone who might not even love him.

Lance wants to understand it. He wants to learn how the two of them met, what possibly happened to draw Shiro to Keith, to keep him here.

He wants to know why Keith won't date him as well. Because, frankly, if Shiro was willing and interested, Lance isn't sure that he would even need a second to contemplate all of the pros and cons before he threw his entire life away just to join this handsome murderer in his life of crime.

The joke feels like it's in bad taste. He feels guilty for even thinking it, and for the fact that it still manages to bring a smile to his lips. He's thankful that Shiro can't read his mind. He's grateful that Keith isn't here to look at him as though he knows what's swirling around in his thoughts, as though judging him for the mere insinuation that he might be interested in a very kind and handsome guy who just so happens to also be a bloodthirsty killer, when Keith himself is apparently intent on pretending that Shiro is nothing but a servant employed to keep him fed.

Shiro allows his question to hang in the air as he takes a long drag. He's looking now at the dark night, peering out into the black sheet of it as though he might possibly be able to discern any scenery from this void, unyielding wall.

And maybe he can, Lance thinks. He still isn't sure where Shiro fits into all of this, or what kind of creature he could be. There's something worn and aged about him, something telling of a tired life, of many years spent doing many things that Lance, at such a young age, could only dream about. And Keith had spoken of him before as though maybe he isn't entirely human either. He'd been so cryptically vague that Lance isn't sure what he should believe anymore.

But Shiro finally speaks, and it breaks Lance's concentration as he flips

through all of the possibilities of Shiro's supernatural ties in search of anything that fits. His voice is low and lilting. His words are smoke and the fog of warm breath catching in the cold. His eyes are hooded, and dark, and distant.

"We've known each other for a *very* long time." A small, nostalgic smile, and Shiro's eyes close against the dark. Lost in memories. Lost in a time that Lance wishes more than anything that he could see in Shiro's mind's eye. "I know that all of this must be very confusing for you. But I think it might be a good idea to listen to Keith. Of course, neither of us can stop you, but… you're a very nice person, Lance. It would be a shame to see you getting wrapped up in all of this."

Lance bites the inside of his lip, puffing out his cheeks as he buries his hands further into his coat pockets. He rounds his shoulders forward, focusing the white heat of his glare right up at Shiro's handsome face. Shiro doesn't look at him, but he hopes that he can feel it. He hopes, at the very least, that perhaps he can hone some of Keith's eerie ability to affect someone physically with nothing but a look alone.

"You're also nice, you know," he says, "So what does it matter? Why do you deserve this more than I do?"

He isn't sure if he means "this" as a good or bad thing. He knows what he feels, but he isn't sure if maybe there's some big detail to all of this that might allow everything to click into place. If maybe, he knew what Shiro knows, he might change his mind and agree with both of them, that no, he really doesn't want to have any part in this.

Shiro laughs, long and low. He flicks the dwindling cherry from the tip of his cigarette, patting it into the snow with the sole of his shoe before tucking the butt into the paper pouch that Lance has long since gotten used to seeing him use during their breaks together.

"I owe Keith a lot. I wouldn't even be alive right now if not for him."

The words feel as though they're heavy with meaning, but Lance can't grasp why. He knows that, in their most basic form, maybe Shiro's just being romantic. Maybe he's telling Lance now that Keith is his life force, the air that he breathes, the reason why he wakes up in the morning—but that doesn't seem within character for the ever-pragmatic Shiro. And Lance knows that his words are calculated. He knows that, despite the fact that Shiro knows that he knows all about whatever the Hell Keith has going on, he's still never spoken about him as though he's anything but human.

It's a game that they've been playing for days now: Lance tries to pry even the smallest scrap of information that he can from Shiro, and Shiro talks circles around him. Lance pretends that he knows far more than he actually knows, in hopes that maybe, someday, he'll bluff his way into some juicy details, and Shiro rebuffs him endlessly—with that cute smile and charming laugh. With enough charm and charisma that Lance allows himself to be lulled into a false sense of contentment until the next time. Kind enough that Lance doesn't even feel bad about losing yet again.

"But you like him, right?" Lance asks, forcing himself to ignore his mortification at his own bluntness for the sake of seeming that though he's more confident than he really is, "You think that if you follow him long enough, I don't know, like… he'll realize that you've been the right guy for him all along?"

Shiro chokes on the smoke of his newly-lit cigarette. He's poised with his hand cupped, shielding his lighter's fire from the gentle breeze around them, immediately jerking his shoulders upward and turning towards Lance with color rising to his cheeks.

He pockets his lighter hurriedly, clumsily with one hand, then tearing the cigarette from his mouth and holding it so tightly between his fingers that he nearly crushes it.

Lance isn't used to seeing him lose his cool, but he imagines that maybe this was the right chord to strike. Through his guilt, his embarrassment, he chalks this up as a very dirty victory.

Shiro coughs again, shaking his head before situating himself once more. The crack in his demeanor is mended just as quickly as Lance expected. He's moping, somewhat, when he crosses his arm over his chest and leans against the wall behind him.

He moves naturally with just one arm, Lance notices. He wonders, guiltily, how many years it must have taken Shiro to grow accustomed to it. He wonders how long ago he must have lost the other one—if he'd ever had it at all.

But Lance doesn't ask, as he never has the courage to, and Shiro cuts him off anyway. He takes a long drag, speaking smoky words when he finally seems to collect himself well enough that he trusts himself to speak.

"You're determined, aren't you?" His punctuating laughter is humorless and dry. A deep breath, another breath of smoke. Lance

watches him fidget uncomfortably, feels guilty, still, for putting him in this position. He turns his dark eyes back to Lance, and the smile that's spread out over his lips is hollow, sad. Lance almost apologizes —almost takes everything back and promises Shiro that he'll be good, he'll stop prying, if only Shiro will smile for real again—but then Shiro continues, gradually, so quietly. Shiro speaks to him candidly for the first time since they've started playing this game, and Lance isn't sure how to feel about all of the ill-spirited means that brought them to this place.

"We were together, actually. A really long time ago."

A flick of ash into the snow. A turn of those hooded eyes to a spot in the darkness that Lance can't see.

"It was brief, fleeting. But it happened. We were… happy, I thought. But Keith put an end to it. He said that he was forcing me to do it, that… he'd put me in a position where I couldn't say no to him."

Forced laughter, another flick of ash into the snow. Lance feels his chest tighten. He feels as though something has reached inside of him and squeezed tightly around his heart.

Shiro's eyes are glassy when he turns them back to Lance, and Lance wants to take it back. He wants to tell Shiro that he's sorry. He wants to find Keith and yell at him, demand that he reconsider, make things right, take Shiro back, if only so Shiro won't feel ever again how he's surely feeling right now.

But Lance is useless, and Keith is hiding.

And Shiro, right now, is undeniably sad.

Lance speaks words that he's unsure of—imperfect words in a quivering voice that he isn't sure will make Shiro feel better or worse. But he speaks what he's feeling, what's been culminating in his chest now for weeks, for days and days since Shiro first smiled at him the night that he arrived here, and in some shape or form, Lance knows now that he'd sensed it—

That his life, from then on, would never be the same once he realized that someone like Shiro could really exist.

"Keith's an idiot if he doesn't want you, but… he's prickly, right? I mean, he's kind of… standoffish and stupidly critical about things and I feel like—like maybe he knows exactly what he wants but just

doesn't wanna go for it? I mean, if you liked me and I knew that you liked me, I don't think anything would stop me from jumping on that immediately, so…"

They're clumsy, stupid words. They barely even make sense. Lance feels so hot now that he can perfectly understand why Keith chooses to wear only that disgusting, filthy coat and nothing else, if he spends so much time talking to someone like Shiro.

But Shiro is smiling now, at least. He looks on the brink of raucous laughter, his cheeks pink and his lips pursed in order to force down the noises that Lance knows must be rising in his chest. His glassy eyes look brighter now, in the dark and the night, with only the shine of his lit cigarette and the pooling glow from a few open windows high above illuminating the space between them. He's still reserved, still wrapped around himself some ways away with his back planted firmly against the wall, but Lance feels as though he's closed some space between them. As though, even by just a few inches, he's managed to bridge a gap and pull away some of the bricks in the wall that Shiro seems to have built up around his heart.

And when Shiro finally does laugh, it's even more gorgeous than ever —because Lance made him laugh. Because he's said something funny enough that it's abated whatever sadness has been boiling within Shiro for many, many years.

"You'd jump on *what* , exactly?" Shiro asks then, his words sprinkled with laughter, his cheeks warm and pink, "On me, or…?"

Lance sputters. Whatever poeticism existed in him just seconds ago is swept away in his own embarrassment.

But Shiro waves a hand, and his cigarette, in the air. He tips his head back to rest against the wall.

Lance can make out the reddening of his cheeks even in the dark. It's nice, despite his own humiliation, to see some color in Shiro's skin.

"I can't say that I'd stop you if you wanted to," Shiro says, but just as quickly adds a hurried, flustered, "N-not that I'm asking you to do that, but if… if you're offering…"

And then, abruptly, they're both equally mortified. And silent, for a long, awkward stretch of time spent pointedly not looking at each other.

Shiro, at one point, had returned home to his apartment. He'd convinced himself that he hadn't witnessed a murder, that he hadn't seen anything strange at all. He'd carried on with his life in denial—worked until he was exhausted, and spent every extra moment studying for his exams.

He'd started spotting a shadow lingering just around the corner of the dark alley behind his word during smoke breaks. He'd told himself then, too, that he was just imagining it. He hadn't met an inhuman creature that night in the slums of his big city. He hadn't found himself in the presence of something that he'd realized, after pressing his peers about the details of their friend's death, they hadn't seen lurking around their party at all.

But Shiro, one night, months later, had caught sight of white skin—so pale that it had seemed to glow like the light of the moon in the dark night. He'd made a point of ignoring the street lamps lining the roads around his work—how they'd gradually each been broken, how the light of them seemed especially absent that night.

The darkness, like a vacuum, seemed to have sucked the entire world into this blackness. His coworkers had started bringing flashlights to work. During his smoke breaks, he could barely see a hand in front of his face.

And the dark, in those moments, felt like it was teaming with life. Thousands of tiny eyes watching him. Voices just quiet enough that he couldn't pick up what they were saying.

He'd felt watched, trapped. Backed into corners everywhere that he went.

But he'd hoped, desperately, that if he denied it enough, maybe nothing would happen. Maybe, hopefully, he'd be allowed to finish his semester and transfer somewhere safer before he found himself wrapped up in whatever terrible thing was just beginning to unfold around him.

He'd been eating that night—cleared himself a spot in the snow on the bench in the alley behind his work and settled down to enjoy his lunch break in silence. He'd felt overwhelmed then, high strung. He'd

felt as though, if he needed to smile at another person or fake another friendly laugh, he might explode.

He'd been stressed for weeks, losing sleep. Agonizing over the fear that had seemed to envelop him, the sight of that slack body in his dreams, and those feet, those dirty fingernails. The absence of porch lights, the slow drawl of music humming through the flimsy windows.

But in that moment, he'd felt calm. He'd learned all about fight or flight in his biology classes. He'd been hearing about it since he was a kid. He'd always told himself that he'd be better in a moment of panic, that he wouldn't just roll over and allow things to happen to him.

But he hadn't felt even an ounce of fear then—when that bare foot had pressed out of the shadows. When that skinny leg had seemed to wobble under the weight of its own body. He'd barely been able to make out the edges of that filthy shirt, imagined the rib bones protruding from flimsy skin. That boy had been all bones and pale flesh. He'd been filthy, too. Caked in dirt from his feet to his knees, hollow-cheeked and entirely too angular, and sad, in ways that Shiro couldn't understand back then.

He'd looked like the children who Shiro had often seen on TV—commercials for war-torn countries in need of donations, for starving kids, like nothing but a collection of articulated bones wrapped in their dirty rags of clothes and the tightly-pulled wax paper of skin that barely tethered them together.

Shiro hadn't known what had compelled him to smile, to lean forward, to tear a piece of his sandwich in one hand, and to extend it out towards the boy with the other.

He'd reached out, into that darkness, towards the moon that was a boy, that might have been a monster.

He'd felt as though he was being kind to a scared animal. He hadn't felt, foolishly at that time, that he was offering himself to a predator.

"Are you hungry?" he'd asked, gentle and slow, careful, "Why don't you come over here and eat?"

The boy hadn't made any move forward. He'd stood there, watching, like a statue—those dark eyes, blacker than the night. Shiro had felt himself pinned there, held down by some invisible force that had drugged him. Feeling drunk, suddenly, feeling lightheaded and unable to grasp the fear that he knew that he should be feeling.

Drained of blood, he thought about the man at that party again.

The door behind him had creaked as it swung open. Shiro, startled, turned to meet the gaze of his tired coworker.

She'd laughed then, at the way that his extended arm wavered before jerking back into his lap. He fretted with the crinkled plastic bag that held his sandwich, nervously, with both hands.

"Did you see a stray dog or something?" She'd asked him.

And he wasn't surprised when the boy was gone. He wasn't surprised that she hadn't seen him before he disappeared.

She'd taken a seat beside him, tugging her cigarettes from her pocket and pulling one from the box. She'd lit up then, breathing in the smoke of it, sighing pleasantly and tipping her chin to the black sky.

"You're too nice, Takashi," she'd told him then, eyes focused on the black smudge of clouds obscuring the moon, "You know… you gotta learn someday that not every stray deserves it. Sometimes, you just gotta let them die."

In the passing months, she'd go missing too.

Six people, total, before Takashi Shirogane was the final name added to that list—the only body that they never found. The only candlelight vigil that didn't end with the discovery of a corpse.

A serial killer, the mafia, a violent new gang that had met an abrupt end—the town left behind would never have the chance to learn what had happened to its inhabitants, before everything slowly went back to normal. People started to forget. The townsfolk who were murdered, the drained blood, the unusual lack of witnesses in often crowded places—they'd be archived as an unusual mystery surrounding a sometimes violent city. They'd exist as nothing but a small, dark blip in the town's history, remembered only in brief passing. People were eager to move on. No one wanted to consider where Takashi might have been rotting away. No one wanted to consider that maybe he'd never died at all.

Time would pass. A mystery would become a distant memory.

And it wouldn't be until another three decades later, accidentally, that anyone would ever meet a man who introduced himself as Takashi Shirogane.

Chapter 7

“Who was that guy that you were talking to last night?”

Lance pauses, dish sponge squeezed in a sudden death grip in one hand, poised over the sudsy, half cleaned pan in the other. His nerves are alight with an energy that he isn’t nearly awake enough to feel right now. The hair on his arms stands on end and his pulse skyrockets.

He doesn’t turn, but he does suck in a long breath. And he has a feeling that he should have been more careful when making all of those poorly planned detours on his way home after work each night. And definitely, more importantly, that he shouldn’t have to be having this conversation on Christmas Eve, of all mornings, while washing the grease and the grizzle from the breakfast dishes.

But his sister, as per usual, doesn’t exactly have a penchant for timing. And he knows without a doubt that she won’t let this one slide by if he just pretends that he has no idea what she’s talking about.

She’s even nosier than he is, at her best. Borderline omnipotent at her absolute worst.

And today, he prays that maybe it’s a better day. Maybe, if he’s lucky, he can make it out of this conversation with enough dignity left to face Shiro later on.

“He’s, uh… the guy who moved in across from us, in… in the other building—y-you know, with the newspaper over the windows?”

His niece and nephews are playing in the other room. The television is playing its fifth rerun of *A Christmas Story* since they turned it on this morning, but it’s more of a subtle tittering of background noise than anything that demands his immediate focus. His sister had allowed all three children to open one present each after they’d finished eating. They’re playing now with their new prizes—and they’re too well-behaved this morning to really take the heat off of Lance, or to divert his sister’s attention long enough for him to slip away to safety.

At this time, in this horrible, unavoidable and totally mortifying moment, Lance wishes that he would have taken the time to establish some kind of secret code with at least one of the kids. An SOS, of sorts —Save Our Sorry Uncle—with the promise of treats or an extra hour

before bath time if they manage to throw their mother off of his trail.

But it's too late for that now, and his sister is still standing behind him, waiting with expectant impatience.

He wonders if he could get away with telling her that Hunk needs help at the convenience store, but he's painfully aware of the fact that he'd told her just a week ago that they were closed today and tomorrow for the holiday.

Tonight, Lance is off from both jobs. He'll return to the convenience store the day after Christmas, but his janitor gig is on hold until the new year. Although he's been given this past week off from that second job, he decides that perhaps he hasn't been particularly subtle about sneaking out just before Shiro is due to get off of work every night regardless.

He just hadn't considered that maybe she'd care enough to actually look for him. Or that he was making enough noise when he'd slipped outside that she would even have a reason to be suspicious of him in the first place.

He can hear her click her tongue, as though accepting the brevity of his answer for perhaps all that she's going to get from him. Her socked foot taps against the tile of the kitchen floor, and Lance is reminded momentarily that she picked up that annoying habit from his mother.

He tries not to wonder what she would think about all of this.

Instead, he distracts himself with the tongue-in-cheek way that his sister asks her next question, and how hot those words feel as they raise a flush under his skin.

"So you needed to leave the house at 3 AM just to talk to him because…?"

Lance would like to think that he's gotten better at bluffing his way through conversations with his sister, of all people, as a person who he's had the last nineteen years to practice lying to, but despite this, he knows that the redness of his ears has probably given him away. That, and maybe how he fumbles with the pan in his hands—how it clatters against the side of the sink before he yanks it back up with a curse through clenched teeth.

"Is that why your clothes always smell like smoke now? You've been hanging out with this guy after work every night?"

It's spoken in a cocky, knowing tone, as though she's caught him red-handed. He remembers it vividly, from many moments when she'd tell on him when they were kids.

"Mom! Lance is eating dirt again!"

"Dad! Lance stole my Barbie styling head and he won't give her back!"

"Mom! Lance kissed a girl at school today and got detention!"

It still manages to make his skin crawl, even though there isn't anyone left to ground him.

When he finally turns, she's leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed over her chest. One raised brow, a coy, calculated smile. She thinks that she has him all figured out, and, ironically enough, she thinks that going outside so late at night just to meet Shiro for a short smoke break is an excessive amount of dedication on his part. He can't imagine how she'd react if she knew everything else.

But, thankfully, he has the common sense, at the very least, not to tell her more than she needs to know. Despite how good it might feel to wipe that snotty grin right off of her face with just how deep in this trench he's actually dug himself.

He's not sure why he suddenly feels so proud of that, but he decides that he can only handle one calamity at a time.

Right now, he chooses to defend himself to his sister, in perhaps the most clumsy, harebrained manner that he's capable of.

"He's just—he's just nice, okay? I feel bad for him, you know, living by himself… working late and never getting to talk to anyone. I just think—"

"That he's cute and you might have a chance with him?"

Lance's skin feels so hot now that he might be able to melt straight through the floorboards. He might manage to singe even the termites embedded deep within the wooden beams separating them from their downstairs neighbors. In his haste and embarrassment, he's flung around with the pan and dish sponge still in hand. He spits a flustered, hurried curse when suds and soapy water fling from the inside of the pan and patter to the floor.

He takes a moment to shove both back into the sink, to rinse his

hands, and to tear the towel from the handle of the oven. As he's leaning down to clean up his mess, he struggles to articulate an answer for everything that might manage to get her off of his case without alluding to the fact that, yes, she really isn't far from the truth. But for whatever reason—whatever he can possibly think to tell her, she absolutely should not pry.

"He's—yeah, yeah, he's cute, alright? But he's nice and… I think he's lonely, so… he's kept me company after work a few times, and I felt bad just ditching him after we started this… this *routine* , so... "

He hates the look of triumph that practically glows on his sister's face. He bites his tongue—both metaphorically and so firmly that it hurts—to avoid admitting everything, just for the sake of nurturing his own stupid pride.

"So because someone was nice and lonely, you decided to start sneaking out in the middle of the night even though you could be sleeping to... *what* ? To smoke with this random guy? Is that who you brought in here the other night? Are you sneaking this dude in here to mess around, Lance? Because, you know, I don't mind when you bring your friends over here, but if we're talking *booty calls* —"

"N-no, no, it's not like that!" Lance is floundering so desperately now that he nearly slips in the water speckled on the floor. He knows that there's no way of telling her that he didn't bring Shiro here without raising suspicion and alluding to the fact that there's more than one attractive, dubious guy who he's got his eye on, but for the life of him, he can't think of a single good reason for bringing someone home that doesn't involve… whatever perverted things she's considering. "I just —I… I told him that I'd loan him a movie, okay? And instead of making him wait outside, I just… let him in for a minute."

Her smile cocks at the edges, her brows bending inward as she pushes a snort of a laugh through her lips.

She obviously doesn't believe him, and for good reason, he thinks. It wasn't exactly what he'd call a winning lie—and he wonders if maybe Shiro had a point before. Maybe he really doesn't have what it takes to live a life of crime if he crumbles so easily beneath the weight of just a little bit of scrutiny.

"So you had to run a bath after you gave him the movie because…?"

Lance pushes himself up from the floor, tossing the towel onto the counter and shoving past her into the hall. His niece looks up from her

new doll and stares at him curiously, flicking her eyes from him to his sister, before shrugging and going back to her game. He knows that these sorts of petty arguments aren't unusual between the two of them, but for the first time, he's found himself in a situation that he isn't comfortable divulging to his sister.

He can't imagine that this is what she meant when she told him that their parents wanted more for him.

He's sure that she'd be horrified if she knew—if she had any idea what sorts of terrible things he's capable of under the right circumstances.

So he shuts her out. He continues walking forward even as she makes to follow after him. And over his shoulder, in a low voice shoved through tightly-gritted teeth, he tells her:

"I won't bring him over again, don't worry. Just—can you just drop it? I'm done talking about this."

He can hear her steps halt behind him. He knows that it's abnormal for him to be this tight-lipped about anything. He knows that he's only managed to worry her more, in his fruitless bid to abate any suspicions that she might have had.

He feels like even more of an idiot than he has all week—more foolish than when he ruined the newly-budding friendship that he'd barely begun culminating with Keith. More brainless than when he'd put his foot in his mouth during what should have been such a pleasant conversation with Shiro.

When he reaches his bedroom, he practically tears the door open, slamming it shut behind him with a slam so loud and forceful that it rattles the pictures on his walls. He slips in socked feet as he attempts to skulk over to his bed, grumbling about shitty apartments, about cheap laminate, about exhausting jobs and soul-draining schedules and just about everything but what's actually bothering him.

He throws himself down onto his unmade bed. And after a short, quiet moment, in which he drags in a deep, calming breath and wills the stress to ease away from his muscles, he rolls from his front onto his back, lacing his fingers together over his belly.

He's glaring at the ceiling, contemplating all of the clever things that he could have said in place of the inane garbage that actually managed to tumble out of his big, dumb mouth. Everything that he could have told his sister to satisfy her instead of hurting her feelings.

All of the ways that he could have been more considerate of Keith's and Shiro's individual plights in order to avoid stepping on their toes.

He knows that he's stupid and clumsy with words. He knows that he fumbles even the most precious relationships and manages to out himself for the tactless buffoon that he truly is inside before he even has a chance to make a good impression.

And he knows that, in reality, despite potential vampirism and murderous tendencies, surely Shiro and Keith can do so much better than him.

He doesn't know why he's allowing himself to get so worked up over the premature ending of a relationship that was doomed to fail from the start. Because he would have ruined it anyway, he knows. He loves his sister and his family more than anything else in the entire world, and even still, despite his overwhelming affection, he can't stop himself from being an asshole, even to them.

He allows himself to revel in his own misery, to feel sorry for himself. His thoughts continue to traverse down further and further self-deprecating paths—to the point that he's mulling over the time that he pulled a girl's ponytail in grade school, and wondering if maybe he was just a bad seed from the start.

His eyes rove over the patterns that he's traced hundreds of times in the spackle on the ceiling. He follows the descent of the sun from high morning shadows in the corners to the early afternoon splotches streaked over the walls. And when he turns his face to the side, when he allows a long sigh to rattle out of him and focuses his gaze on his nightstand, he catches sight, once again, of the book that he'd read to Keith that night, just a week ago.

He reaches out, drawing his fingers over the cover of it. The holographic paper pressed into it glitters in the orange-cast of the sun. He wonders if Keith and Shiro are doing anything special for Christmas. He wonders, thinking back to the peculiarities of that night, if Keith even knows what Christmas is.

He isn't sure why it matters since Keith still hasn't shown his face since Lance sneaked him in that night. He's starting to realize that it doesn't matter how much he rebels—how desperately he might try to reach out to Keith despite his adamance that Lance needs to stay away. Lance realizes, only now, after a week of no sign of Keith whatsoever, that maybe Keith has stayed hidden all this time because

he truly meant it when he claimed that whatever was just beginning to bud between them was ending, right then and there.

But he doesn't know how Keith is eating if he isn't leaving his apartment to search for food. He isn't sure if any creature in the universe—supernatural or not—could deftly manage to avoid leaving any tracks or trail behind.

Lance isn't sure if he's been starving, or if he ever actually hunts for his own meals at all. He doesn't know if Shiro is really his sole source of sustenance, or if maybe he could be trusted to wander away from the complex without hurting any people along the way.

None of it makes very much sense to Lance: how Keith can possibly stay fed with such a limited amount of townsfolk having gone missing. Or even how often he needs to eat. He looks tired and starving more times than he doesn't—and Lance wonders if maybe it's similar to the movies. If maybe, he could ever manage to eat enough, he'd be just as vibrant and captivating as all of the more stereotypical vampires that Lance has watched on the big screen throughout his life.

But Lance isn't even sure if Keith is a vampire, and Shiro's no help. Keith himself had seemed just as tight-lipped about it when Lance had prompted him, but his interest in that particular page of Lance's book had been telling.

Lance wonders if Keith is the only one of his kind. He wonders how he got that way in the first place.

And he wonders, helplessly, already tired, if even Keith really knows any of the answers to these questions that have been buzzing in his thoughts for days now.

Maybe he's just as blind and confused as everyone else in the world.

Maybe he's lonely. Maybe he's never met anyone even remotely similar to himself before. He doesn't know how he'd feel in a world where he was the only human left. He isn't sure how it might feel to know that he could never live a full enough life—could never eat enough, be free enough, enjoy the world enough without the threat of someone discovering that he's a real, living creature and trying to capture him, or kill him, or ruin whatever pathetic excuse for an existence that he'd been allowed to live until then.

Lance thinks back to all of the superhero fantasies that he used to have as a kid. He thinks about the ability to fly, the power to move

through walls—invisibility and x-ray vision, the power to manipulate wind, and fire, and earth.

He thinks about how his father used to hold him high above his head. How he'd spin him around fast in his arms to make his toy cape flutter in the air. He thinks about the power to stop a car from careening over a cliffside. He thinks about the ability to end an endless winter, to finally drag out the sun.

Lance has never heard of a superhero who could successfully bring the dead back to life. He wouldn't have thought about that as a child, as an imaginary hero held up in his father's arms.

He isn't sure if just one superpower could fix everything that's broken in his life. He isn't sure if anything in the world could mend whatever's gone sour between Shiro and Keith.

Keith can influence people's decisions to a small degree. He can leap from high balconies and, surely, scale walls. He can survive without breathing or blinking or eating. And he can disappear into the night as though he'd never been there at all.

Lance knows that Keith is more powerful than his stature might lead an unknowing onlooker to believe. In his own right, he might even be considered the world's only genuine superhero.

But maybe the powers aren't all that they're chalked up to be. Maybe being strong or fast or having x-ray vision, the power to lift cars, to become invisible, to stop time—

They don't matter as much as he might have thought when he was a child.

Because Keith has powers sleeping within him that are unlike anything that Lance could ever imagine.

But despite this, Lance is positive that none of them can make him any less alone.

"You know, tomorrow is Christmas."

Keith's sleepy eyes watch him from the bathtub as Shiro lingers in the

threshold of the door. He hasn't woken up entirely yet, and Shiro suspects that he might only be conscious right now because of the scent of fresh blood that's emanating from Shiro right now.

The bathroom lights have been dimmed down—the slide switch stopped at a piece of masking tape that Shiro had the foresight to place over the face of it when they first moved in. He knows that bright, artificial lights won't hurt Keith, but he also knows that the last thing Keith needs upon waking up is to be blinded and uncomfortable.

He's been feeling under the weather lately, or, whatever the immortal equivalent of that very human experience might be. He's been so hungry since the last time that he was allowed a proper meal that Shiro has been forced to watch helplessly as his health has degraded to this point.

It's been weeks since Keith's been able to feast on human blood, and even longer since he's been given a ration large enough to fill him. It started, first, with the shine of his hair dulling down, with the tangles in it growing more unmendable. And then he'd grown paler, more tired. The dark hollows of his eyes now seem closer to caverns than sockets. He looks nearly skeletal as he slides a shaking hand over the edge of the bathtub to pull himself up.

But Shiro shakes his head, and he ignores the nagging feelings of guilt for the time being. Instead, he lifts the mug in his hand in a small greeting, his smile forced and artificial as he meets Keith's glassy gaze from across the limited space of the bathroom.

It feels a little bit domestic, in the strangest sense of the word, standing here with a mug of warm blood in hand, pressed together with the crossword puzzle book that he'd picked up from a drugstore on his way home from the hospital last night. On the cover of the book, he'd stamped a bright red bow—one of the cheap plastic adhesive ones for 2 cents that he'd spotted right next to the counter—but now he feels foolish for dressing it up. It feels wrong to play house when things are obviously not going well for them. It was his idea to move somewhere more innocuous and quiet. Keith had warned him that hunting would be harder in a small town, that perhaps there wouldn't be enough accidents to scavenge or blood drives to pilfer to keep them afloat.

But he'd been headstrong, determined. He'd thought that the peace and privacy of rural living might allow them some wiggle room to

exist without fear of being discovered.

Keith was right, of course, and now he's starving. Now he's barely hesitating at the threshold of an "I told you so" that Shiro knows that he'd never say out loud, even though he's the only one who's been forced to suffer for the sake of Shiro's misguided ego.

But, as it stands, he's lingering in the doorway with a mug and a Christmas present that feel suddenly very out of place. He doesn't understand why he'd thought it would be a good idea at the moment —what could have possibly compelled him to start celebrating now when they've never even given the holidays a single thought since they first started this.

He chalks the whole thing up to feeling nostalgic, blames it on Lance in the quietest, most private corners of his thoughts. Keith looks at him curiously, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and pulling himself further up in the tub.

Shiro sets the mug on the counter, taking a moment to tuck the book under his arm before grabbing it once again. It isn't warm enough to steam—not how it had in the night air when he'd harvested it from one unfortunate, still-twitching creature that he'd caught with the bumper of his car. Not how the coffee had steamed on his table in the breakroom at work. Not how he might prefer if only so he could pretend that any of this is more innocent and normal than it really is. But he likes to imagine that maybe, in another world, it could be a mug of hot chocolate instead. Maybe they could be sitting together in front of a brightly decorated tree, in place of this dingy, ill-lit bathroom. Maybe he'd be preparing a large dinner of turkey or ham, mashed potatoes made from scratch, chocolate pie and pudding crafted from some old family recipe that he's long since forgotten.

And maybe Lance would be tittering close behind him, having caught on long ago to his penchant for burning food on the stove. Lance, he thinks, would probably be good at baking, with all of those little kids to tend after. Lance would be almost motherly in the way that he coddled both of them. The pair of them would be dressed in festive aprons. They'd have their cheeks smudged with flour or chocolate sauce. They'd be laughing through their frustrations and butchering the words to carols. They'd be happy in a bright, warm home. And the confines of the prison where he currently resides would be nothing but a very distant nightmare.

And maybe Keith would be watching old holiday movies on the

television. He'd be lazy and already stuffed full of all of the samples that they'd begged him to test. He'd be sprawled out languidly on their wide living room couch, bathing in the twinkling lights of their tree like a contented house cat, without a worry or a fear in the world. In a universe that would love him and accept him no matter what, in place of this cold and dark and terrifying world that Keith learned many years ago to hide from.

A reality where Keith is happy and well-fed—Shiro almost laughs at how even the barest of essentials sound like a dream to him now.

Maybe, he thinks, he should have gifted Keith the address to some no-name junky's house instead. Maybe he should have lifted the ban on hunting humans and just turned a blind eye in order to allow Keith to eat well, to do what his instincts are always urging him to do—to be normal by his own definition, for once, if only so he wouldn't look so pale, and tired, and emaciated right now.

But the reality of this moment doesn't waver, no matter how desperately he wishes that he could be a better man. Keith still reaches out a quivering hand for the mug, and Shiro still feels sick to his stomach when he notices how much thinner Keith looks tonight.

The skeletal theme prevails, no matter how terribly Shiro wishes that maybe it was just a trick of the light when he'd come in. The dark veins at the corners of Keith's eyes seem almost swollen now. He's lost so much density that every line beneath that paper skin seems so defined that it could very well be drawn on in thick lines of ink.

He won't die—Shiro knows that for a fact. He's gone much longer without eating before, and nothing ever seems to happen to him. He just becomes thinner, shakier. He continues to wither away and grow weaker by the day. It's torture, Shiro thinks, to starve and never die. To wake up each morning knowing that the person who claims to love him more than anyone else in the world won't let him eat. That he'll feed him these small portions that barely tide him over, and if he wants to be full, if he wants to get the nourishment that his body is screaming for, it might just be the end of both of them.

He'd promised Shiro a long time ago that he was finished hunting people. And if he broke that promise now, Shiro isn't sure anymore if he'd be more upset with Keith or himself, for ever expecting more of him than he's surely even capable of.

Keith swallows the contents of the mug in one big gulp. Shiro pretends

that he doesn't feel terrible when Keith resorts to lapping at the leftovers clinging to the edges of the cup.

He draws in a deep breath, situating himself on the closed lid of the toilet, before pressing the book forward between them. Keith sets the mug on the edge of the tub, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and hesitates for a moment as though he's considering drawing his tongue over those remnants as well.

He's wrapped up in his old, tattered coat, but he isn't wearing it. Shiro knows that he prefers to wear as few clothes as possible as often as possible. He knows that the only reason why Keith wears the coat at all is for his own benefit.

He wonders if he should feel guilty about that too.

In a strange moment of humor, he wonders how Lance might have reacted to meeting Keith, had Shiro never implemented the "no nudity" rule in the first place. He wonders if it would be harder or easier to shake him now. With Lance, he can't really be too sure.

But in Keith's current state, Shiro isn't sure if Lance would even recognize him. Lance seems to think that Keith has been absent because he's angry. He seems to believe that he's done something wrong and ruined things between them.

When Lance had mentioned it, Shiro didn't know how to react, or what to tell him. He'd felt awful for allowing Lance to wallow in those guilty feelings, but he'd felt even worse when he'd considered the possibility of admitting to Lance that Keith is very sick.

And that it's all Shiro's fault—for bringing him here in the first place. For truly believing that a wild thing can ever stop being wild if it's kept away from the outside world long enough.

When Keith reaches forward and pulls the book from his hands, Shiro thinks about exotic pets. He thinks about big snakes and monkeys, about sugar gliders and foxes and wolves.

He thinks about the audacity of taking an animal and placing it in a cage. About clipping Keith's wings, and expecting for him to act like a human when it's clearly killing him.

Shiro knows that things wouldn't end well if Keith were allowed to run wild. He'd been hungry even when he'd crashed into Shiro's life, even when he'd been unbound by the shackles that he'd so willingly

allowed Shiro to clasp around his ankles. He knows that Keith doesn't want to hurt people—that he mourns their deaths each time that he slips up.

It isn't out of malice, but necessity. It isn't something that either of them wants to happen, something that anyone rejoices in place of the very human remorse that Keith's still so capable of feeling.

He's flipping lazily through the book, his eyes jumping from one word to the next—surely solving the puzzles in his head at a speed that Shiro might still have to struggle to keep up with. From what he's collected, he might have to study for a few decades before he could catch up. He might spend the rest of his life trying to catalog half of the knowledge that Keith keeps locked up tight in his head.

But Keith seems less focused on the puzzles tonight. At certain points in time, he's welcomed the distraction eagerly. He's expressed the most excited enthusiasm about filling these books that Shiro has ever seen from him before.

Keith is allowed very few real pleasures in this limited life that he leads. The crosswords, a fleeting movie, the conversations that he's had with other people.

A long time ago, they used to spar. They'd wrestle sometimes, they'd playfight. Keith learned that humans could fight gracefully—almost like dancing, he'd said, and Shiro had then taught him how to dance.

And Shiro would read to him as well, a long, long time ago.

These habits had been lost gradually over time. They'd faded away into exhaustion and misery—into the black void of his own prevailing depression that had inhibited him from trying to make the best of this endless, directionless life.

Keith didn't ask when they'd stopped wrestling. He didn't press it when the last drive-in movie theater closed down, and Shiro wasn't willing to risk sitting them so close to so many human beings. He'd accepted it quietly when Shiro stopped bringing home books to read, stopped receiving the morning paper—when he left behind even the novels that they'd collected during their travels the last time that they moved.

Shiro is hit with the sudden, profound epiphany that he's barely doing enough. He's allowed himself to sink deeper and deeper into this misery of his. He's taken everything out on Keith.

And Keith, now, is flipping through this one pathetic gift from him as though it's a priceless treasure. He's very gentle with the pages between his fingers. He holds the book as though he's afraid that he might crease it.

Shiro sighs, forcing himself to be quiet and to act natural when he does it. He rolls up the sleeve of his sweater with his teeth in the fabric, cursing quietly when the motion is so unpracticed and unnatural that it immediately catches Keith's attention.

He doesn't speak until Shiro offers him his wrist, with the palm of his closed hand pointed to the ceiling. Dark veins under paper white skin, Keith scrunches up his nose at the sight of it. But his eyes trace the blue lines of Shiro's veins. A traitorous tongue pokes out through his lips. It's a single, pink blotch of color against the gaunt and sunless white. Keith's unfocused eyes, they're rimmed in a deep hollow. He looks like he's dying, even though he can't. He looks as though he might fade away any moment now. As though the universe would ever be that kind to him.

"I can't." His voice is so feeble, so cracked that Shiro feels as though his chest is caving in. "I—I can't do that."

Shiro dreads the pain of it. He struggles desperately not to shudder when he imagines the feeling of those sharp teeth piercing his skin. Along his wrist, all the way up to the dip of his elbow—if he looks close enough, he can map out the trail of the faint, silvery pinpricks of scars.

Keith is watching him like a dog commanded to yield at the sight of a treat. He's watching him like a prisoner watching a guard eat dinner through wrought iron bars. He's drained of color and fat and will to lift himself up and venture out into the night. They've long since past the point at which Keith might have previously sneaked out to hunt animals in the forests when Keith might have accidentally attacked someone wandering through the dark streets.

Soon enough, if enough time is allowed to pass in these conditions, he'll do nothing but sleep, and wait, until an opportunity arises.

And if that never manages to happen, well…

They've never waited any longer than that.

Beyond his own guilt, his shortcomings, his fears and regrets and his looming feelings about all of this—he isn't sure if he's willing to risk

the safety of the people in this apartment complex just because he's failed to hold up his end of the bargain that he and Keith made many decades ago.

"I won't die," Shiro tells him, "But I can't see you like this, so… For Christmas, please. My… as my gift."

Keith purses his lips, flicking his gaze back to the book in his hands as though it's betrayed him. Shiro almost laughs at the implication of it. As though he'd purchase something so small in the hopes of guilting Keith into feeding from him, as though there's really any comparison between puzzles that Keith's already half-solved, and remedying his own guilt for the few days that his blood might breathe some life back into Keith's brittle body.

Keith sets the book down on the rim of the tub, gently, right next to the mug. Shiro stares at the little cartoon reindeer adorning the face of it. He looks at its goofy little smile, the ornaments hung from its antlers, the wreath strewn around its neck.

The receptionist at work bought him the mug for their secret Santa exchange. He'd bought his recipient—an elderly nurse—a copy of a murder mystery by her favorite author. She'd hugged him tightly when she'd opened it. He'd laughed at the funny face of the reindeer on his mug.

Keith's teeth feel like needles when they puncture his skin. He bites his lip, willing down the hiss that rises like steam in his throat.

They'd listened to *Jingle Bell Rock* at the office party. They'd switched between that and three or four other holiday songs. Shiro had swayed playfully to *Feliz Navidad* , he'd recited the limited Spanish that he knew from the song in a lilting, joking sort of way that always managed to get a laugh from his coworkers. They'd eaten turkey and mashed potatoes that their shift lead and brought to work in wide, steam-covered Tupperware containers. They'd spent the night as normal people might have—and everyone else had returned home, after, to their families and their gifts, and their own, personal parties.

His mug, filled with candy that the receptionist thought that he might like—he'd tossed the contents in the dumpster behind his work, long after everyone else had gone home. He'd felt too sick to eat anything. He'd felt a strange sense of mourning sweeping through him, at the mere insinuation that he might have anyone to share it with. At the fleeting thought that maybe, in another universe, he'd return home to

a happy partner. They'd make dinner. They'd open gifts. Keith would steal some of the chocolates wrapped in shiny foil from the mug. Their garbage would look festive for weeks after the holiday had ended.

Keith wouldn't be starving. He wouldn't be lapping at Shiro's spilled blood with such care that Shiro suspects that he's barely consumed any of it at all.

And Shiro himself wouldn't be sitting in this small, filthy bathroom. He wouldn't be resting his back against the uncomfortably angular lid of the toilet. His socks wouldn't be staining in the droplets of spilled liquid slipping down to the tiles on the floor.

"Keep going," he breathes, "Don't stop until you're full."

Keith's eyes flick up to him. He shudders a breath, grasps at Shiro's arm with loose fists, leaning further forward and plunging those razor-tipped teeth into his skin again.

Shiro feels a sense of vertigo wash over him. He feels as though he might throw up. But he tells Keith to keep going—urges him to continue until he's full.

He can feel trails of blood dripping, growing thicker along his arm. His body feels numb now, and he loses the feeling that he's a physical being, tethered to this spot in this bathroom, in this plane of existence. He turns his gaze to the ceiling, drops his head against the wall. The back of the toilet is digging uncomfortably into his back. His muscles slack, black dots the corners of his vision.

He feels as though he's floating on the surface of ocean water. He thinks about a story that Lance told him about almost drowning when he was a kid. How the world had been striped with disorienting white and the water had tossed him around like nothing but a single grain of sand in an endless abyss.

Lance had told him that when a person finds themselves lost in a dark ocean, sometimes they lose the distinction between up and down. They'll flail to a surface and find the ocean floor. They'll suffocate before they manage to correct that mistake.

And Shiro, now, feels as though he's been trapped in that in-between for decades now. He wouldn't know a way out of it even if he had the will to swim.

Keith's tongue is warm and wet and eager. His lips are pressed hard

into the stinging wounds that he's created in Shiro's skin.

He only stops when Shiro slips from the edge of the toilet, slamming down to the tile, to his blood, to the unforgiving surface of the floor.

He's immediately out and over the ledge. He's calling Shiro's name, apologizing, and asking him if he's okay.

Shiro's wrist bleeds until Keith clasps the edge of something against it. It's a cloth thing—the coat, he spots through the black haze. Keith's eyes are wide and afraid, but they're alive. He's fretful as he struggles to shake Shiro awake.

But there's color returning to his skin. He's so beautiful as he wakes up again. He's unbreakable porcelain, he's warm and he's soft and his voice doesn't jitter like the death rattle of a wild animal's final breath.

Shiro finds himself faced with the possibility that this Keith could exist in his mind forever. Those shackles, his selfishness, the cage that he's locked Keith in and thrown away the key—

He could free him now if he keeps going. If, for the first time in his miserable life, he sees something through to the end.

"K—keep going… until you're full, K-Keith—d-don't stop—"

Keith's arguments are muffled and muted. Like television static, like a world beneath the surface of disorienting ocean water. Like the gradual, faded ending of a movie that Shiro's watched for entirely too long.

He slips away into sleep. Darkness and quiet, then *Jingle Bell Rock* . He's swaying again to Christmas music. He's coming home to a bright, warm apartment. Lance is making dinner. Keith is waiting for him with a mug of hot chocolate on the couch.

The reindeer's goofy smile makes him laugh when Keith hands the mug over. The bulbs hanging from its antlers match the ones that they've hung from their tree.

He's happy, for a moment. He's content to drag out the illusion that he can already feel folding under the oppressive weight of consciousness.

When he fades back into reality, he's lying on the living room floor. There's something soft and warm under his head. For a moment, he thinks that it might be pillows from the bathroom. He notices the

blood-dotted blanket that Keith's rested over him.

But it shifts, as Keith continues to tug on his arm. And Keith, himself, is still naked. There's not a hint of embarrassment in his expression as he fumbles with the bandage that he's securing around Shiro's wrist.

Keith's chin is smudged with the black, drying blood that forces everything into perspective. His eyes are more focused now—blacker, deeper. His hair has already begun to regain its shine.

He bats Keith's fingers away, and reaches, instead, to cup his palm over Keith's cold cheek. He smiles, his eyes feel heavy, filled with the wet of tears.

"You deserve better than this."

Keith doesn't argue or fight. He doesn't reprimand Shiro or demand that he never do anything like that again.

He just takes Shiro's arm in his hands once more, pulls away from his face so he can continue to fret with the bandage. Shiro isn't sure what it might feel like to pack up leftovers when he hasn't eaten enough. He can't comprehend refusing a good meal while he's starving to death.

And he's never had to look dinner in the eyes before killing it. He's never been forced to squeeze the breath from the lungs of a crying creature and smother it until it can't fight anymore.

He doesn't know why he possibly deserves normal when all that he's done is ruin everything for the only person who he's ever loved.

He doesn't know how Keith can possibly look at him, with how often he's been the single foil to all of his carefully laid plans.

And he doesn't know what he's crying for when he cries—when this hole deep inside of him started growing so exponentially that his chest is collapsing, folding over itself in the absence of a beating heart, or breathing lungs. Or any of the churning organs or organic pieces that might make him more human than he feels right now. Why he's suddenly caving in on himself, wrapped up in this furious supernova of self-hatred and regret. Why he's decaying here, alone and miserable and bled out in a darkened, empty living room, under the watchful eye of the ever-present monster who he's kept chained to him for decades now.

Keith is taping up the edges of his bandage when he slips away again.

He enjoys the warmth that he feels around him. He imagines that perhaps they're cuddled together on a wide, three-person couch. Maybe Lance is cleaning up after dinner. Maybe he's stepped outside to the balcony to call his family.

Maybe, when he wakes up, this will all have been an awful dream. He'll realize that there are no monsters lurking in the thick black of the night. There are no secrets or murders and no reason to pack up his meager life and plant roots elsewhere every time that something goes wrong.

He isn't allowing Lance to dip his toes into a shark tank. He isn't watching an innocent person getting wrapped up in the very same situation that's already ruined his life. He isn't so selfish that he'll allow that to happen just to abate his own loneliness.

He dreams of an old apartment in the city with leaky pipes and groaning walls. Of a boyfriend who wouldn't stay with him when he traveled so far away. Of classmates and coworkers who he'd never managed to grow closer to than arm's length.

He isn't sure if he would have ever managed to be happy, as a human. He doesn't know if he'd even had anything to live for before Keith came into his life.

And Lance feels like a warm, summer sun—illuminating their endless dark winter. He can understand why Keith is so afraid to get close to him, why he's so careful not to get his fingers burned.

When he fades back into awareness, he's wrapped in another blanket. His arm is mended. There's a pillow tucked under his head.

Next to him on the floor, the puzzle book has been left open to the middle page. When he finds the strength to flip through it, he isn't surprised to discover that it's been completely finished.

There's a word filling the middle blocks, scrawled in a beautiful, familiar calligraphy. It's been circled twice, and his eyes struggle to focus in the darkness well enough to read it.

"This blood-sucking monster has plagued humans since the Mesopotamian ages."

Seven spaces. Connected through the middle by the "M" from the beginning of Manticore.

Shiro cracks a laugh.

Vampire.

Keith has never questioned it before this. He's never asked what he might be, where he must have come from, who he could have been before he woke up that dark, winter night—wrapped in a blanket in the frozen gully beneath a bridge. Hungry and hyper-focused, unaware of who he was or what he was capable of doing.

He's never been interested in the research that Shiro's done on the subject, never dabbled in any investigating of his own. He's always been adamant that understanding his situation would make him no better at living through it. He's almost seemed to believe that he's the only one of his kind.

Shiro wonders what might have changed for him.

But when he calls out, when he pulls himself to sit up and forces down his own dizziness, he realizes that he's alone here. He isn't sure how long it's been.

His arm feels numb. His head feels light.

He staggers across the living room, fetches his coat, slides into his shoes.

And he stumbles out into the frigid night.

Chapter 8

Lance is embarrassed, albeit completely unsurprised, to find himself waiting for Shiro at their regular meeting place—right on schedule, gift in hand, as though they'd actually made plans to meet up tonight.

He waits, at first, for fifteen minutes. He checks his watch periodically, shuffling his feet in the freshly fallen snow, breath hanging heavy in the air as he tries to convince himself that he isn't freezing. He considers going back inside and watching from the window, but then he wonders if his sister might stop him. He wonders if Shiro might, at some point, look outside too, and if it would be better or worse if he were to catch Lance waiting around for him like some kind of lost dog.

So another hour passes, and he clears away snow from the concrete, sliding down the wall and resting his back against it, his backside on the ground. He ignores the cold wetness seeping into his clothing. He distracts himself with games and message boards on his phone.

And finally, after a grand total of one hour and thirty-five minutes, he catches sight of a familiar blotch of white in the dark. And he feels, suddenly, just as silly as relieved. Just as creepy as he feels excited to see Shiro, ambling down the stairs and stumbling over the snow that's fallen at the foot of them.

He's obviously disheveled when he draws near enough that Lance can make out his features. His hair is standing up in odd directions, his coat unzipped and his sweater curiously dark-stained. Lance knows better by now than to question it. He averts his eyes from the speckles dotting Shiro's clothes, wondering miserably which sorry sucker must have been bled out on Christmas eve for the sake of Keith's dinner.

Instead of dwelling on it, Lance fiddles with the parcel in his hands. He drags in a few deep breaths as Shiro greets him warmly, yet tiredly, and waves a limp hand in the air. From beneath the cuff of his sleeve, Lance can barely make out the edges of a bandage fastened around his wrist. The corners where it's held in place are starting to peel up, and if Lance squints hard enough in the dark, he can barely make out the dark spots bleeding through.

He swallows thickly. That's really not a good sign.

But he clears his throat, and he tells himself that he shouldn't ruin the

mood with such prying questions. He's still feeling the residual sting of embarrassment from the last time that he put his foot in his mouth, and he really doesn't want to repeat that misstep tonight. Not when he's brought a peace offering. Not when Shiro already seems as though he could use nothing more than a month-long nap.

He shoves up from the ground, careful with the parcel as he wipes away the damp fabric clinging to his back. Shiro offers a weak smile. There are dark caverns hollowed around his eyes. He looks undead now, like a zombie in an old horror movie. He looks as though he's risen from his grave just to meet Lance here.

Lance makes a point of not looking him in the eyes. They're too glazed and unfocused. He's swaying where he stands. This seems like a bad time for pleasantries, but Lance is at a loss now. He's caught between the only two cards in his hand—putting an emphasis on the obvious problem that Shiro has presented to him and perhaps ruining whatever mood Shiro is attempting to bluff here, or ignoring Shiro's obviously declining health and risking him collapsing right in the middle of the courtyard.

He chooses the latter. He feels selfish for doing so. But if he's learned anything about Shiro and Keith since meeting them so many weeks ago, it's that neither of them is particularly willing to admit that a problem is really a problem. Even if that problem is threatening to kill them.

"H-hey, Merry Christmas." he greets, because he realizes, noting the time, that the days have bled together once again, and Shiro is the first person that he's seeing today—the first smiling face that greets him, instead of his niece or nephews, or even his sister welcoming him from sleep to another Christmas morning. "I—uh, I… *here* ."

He shoves the package towards Shiro, forcing his gaze to the ground between their feet, not daring to move his eyes upward and take in the surely confused expression that Shiro is making at him right now.

He trembles, and he swears to himself that it's only because of the cold. He isn't this nervous about giving a gift to the guy who he's spent the last month standing outside with after work just to smoke and chat with. He isn't seriously this mortified about giving a "friend" a Christmas present.

Shiro pulls the package away from him gently, and Lance can hear the small puff of air pushed through his lips, the pained hiss from such a

small exertion of energy that shouldn't be this hard. Only then does he allow his arm to drop. He raises his eyes to meet Shiro's, and he swears that he's died a thousand deaths and been reborn, stronger and better and far more confident from the ashes of his prior useless self, upon witnessing surely the most beautiful, flushed smile that's ever graced a human face.

Shiro is practically beaming. He's so pink that the sight of him rivals even the red bulbs hanging inside of Lance's apartment on his Christmas tree.

"Th—thank you, Lance." Shiro's voice wavers. His smile is lopsided and astonished. His eyes are glassier and more unfocused than Lance has seen them even in the peak of exhaustion. Momentarily, Lance notes how dizzy he seems. How he's swaying ever-so-gently in place. How his hand trembles as it struggles to grasp the gift, and Lance is reminded, once again, of the tourniquet wrapped around his wrist. He feels as though something is writhing about in his belly. He feels fear coiling tight inside of him, as he contemplates all of the things that could have happened to Shiro before he got here that might have hurt him. Where Keith must have gone away to, why he hasn't seen him around for weeks now, but why Shiro hasn't seemed particularly eager to divulge any information.

He feels trapped now, in this confusion, in the lack of clues or hints or any solid understanding of what's been conspiring between the two of them. He feels as though he's watching Shiro collapse under the weight of this terrible experience from the other side of a glass wall. He can see him. He can call out for him.

But he can't reach him, no matter how desperately he tries.

Shiro's voice is a quiet quiver that's barely audible even in the silent, cold night. But Lance tethers himself to the reality of those quiet words. He forces himself to focus his attention on Shiro, and only Shiro, in place of how useless or scared or angry he wants to feel right now.

"I—I didn't get you anything, I—I'm so sorry."

Lance pieces together what he considers to be a charming smile. He reaches forward and rests a hand on Shiro's arm, more to steady him than for any form of comfort. Shiro presses his weight against the wall behind him, breathing deeply for a moment before fiddling with the tape at the edges of the package. It pops easily, and Lance feels a rush

of relief. He'd purposefully wrapped in a flimsy, less practiced way, in hopes that it might be easier for Shiro to open. He'd crafted it meticulously with a situation similar to this one in mind.

Maybe not one where Shiro is standing here like a husk—where he's stumbling over his words and nearly drunk off of whatever terrible thing must have happened to him—but perhaps just with the knowledge that he'd have to do these things one-handed.

The only thing that could have made the current situation any worse might be standing here, awkward and regretful and burning with the sting of secondhand embarrassment as Shiro clumsily attempted to open a present that Lance had tried too hard to make pretty.

"It's fine, man, really!" He swoops in the save the day. He doesn't want to make Shiro feel bad tonight. He doesn't want to make him feel as though he owes him anything, but…

"How about this? If you wanna give me something in return, why don't you gift me your *company* for dinner one of these days? I know you haven't experienced everything that this town has to offer yet—and I gotta tell you: the local diner? It makes a mean omelet."

Shiro's still smiling, but something about it seems off. He practically coughs a laugh, finagling the package and somehow still managing to pop the tape from the remaining edges, despite how shaky and unsteady he suddenly seems.

He allows the paper to fall to the ground at his feet. His arm feels dreadfully cold in Lance's hand, as though the chill of it has somehow seeped through the thick fabric of his coat. It seems as though he might topple over if Lance were to pull away, but his focus is entirely on the package in his hands—a leatherbound cigarette box with a little pouch in the side to tuck his lighter in. They'd been put on display at Lance's convenience store job for the weeks leading up to Christmas, and he'd had to hide the only remaining leather one beneath the register in fear of being forced to buy Shiro the glittery one instead—or the one adorned with those tacky flames, or the one with a herd of stampeding stallions galloping majestically from the front cover to the back.

It's a practical gift, and maybe even a little useless, but Shiro looks at it as though it's the most amazing thing that he's ever seen.

"I know it's kinda dumb," Lance says, forcing a laugh, "but hey, if you're gonna be a career smoker, you might as well have all of the

sick gear, right?"

Shiro laughs too—short and clipped and airy. He smiles at Lance then, his cheeks hollow and pallid, drained of the color that they'd just held moments ago. He seems as though he's bound to faint any second now, and Lance wonders, frantically, if he needs to call an ambulance.

"H-hey, uh, are you okay? Do you need help, or—or do I need to call someone, or—"

"I'm okay." Shiro is winded. He clutches the gift to his chest, settling more of his weight against the wall, "I'll be fine. 'S not like I can die."

He rattles off a laugh that could easily pass for a sob, but his eyes seem dry now. He's breathing in a lurching, jilted sort of way. His fingers are clinging to the cigarette box so loosely that it seems ready to slide through them, and topple down to the ground at any moment.

And he slips, slowly, down the wall. Lance comes down with him—from his feet to his knees, with his hands placed firmly on either side of Shiro, struggling to hold his weight and ease him gradually enough to the ground that he doesn't hurt himself when his backside meets the icy concrete.

They're sitting together then—Lance kneeled between Shiro's open knees, Shiro splayed out and slack, his eyes distant and unfocused, staring off at something in the dark, just behind Lance's shoulder.

Shiro's voice comes and goes. He says words so slurred to Lance that Lance can't understand a single thing. His hand is clammy when it finds Lance's cheek. His lips are dry and white and barely moving as he tries to put motion to speech.

"You're… you're too nice, Lance… s—sometimes… sometimes you just need to let the strays die."

It's snowing, and it's cold. It's almost four in the morning on Christmas day, and the streetlamps that might have illuminated the dark shadows in the corners of this tender, private moment have been busted out. The snow is melting between Lance's knees and the concrete, the denim of his pants chafing raw against his skin, his hands trembling in the frigid, winter cold.

Shiro passes in and out of consciousness. He babbles for a while, and his eyes slip closed. Lance toes the border between his normal life and something darker, something so terrible that it's drained Shiro of any

goodness, any happiness that he must have had at some point—long, long ago.

And Lance, between Shiro's knees, pulling his coat tighter around him and checking the dark stains in the bandage under his sleeve—he wonders what he'd be willing to give up for love.

"You're not gonna die, Shiro," he whispers—to the silence, to the night, to the man who might not even be able to hear him anymore, "Keith needs you. And… you can't, right? You couldn't even die if you wanted to."

Shiro's smile then is dry and sardonic, miserable if Lance has ever witnessed true misery before.

He reminds Lance of an old painting. Of those boring history documentaries that his sister watches sometimes while the kids are at school. Shiro, now, is one of those old Van Goghs or Da Vincis covered in dust and dirt. He's de-saturated and filthy, caked with the wear and tear of however many years that he's passed, untouched, through history. But Lance isn't sure what might be beneath the clutter, if someone were to brush him off. If they scraped away the mess, the pain, the layers of trauma and agony—he isn't sure if there would be anything left underneath.

He isn't sure if Shiro is anyone anymore if he doesn't have this hurt to cling to.

"You're right." Shiro barks a laugh. "I want to, and I can't. I want him, and—"

I can't have him.

They sit together for a long moment in silence. Lance feels a kaleidoscope of emotions churning around in his chest. He can't cling to a single, solitary thought. He can't figure out if he's more angry or sad. If he wants to find Keith and scream at him, or if he just wants to make sure that he's okay.

The snow, and the night, and that invisible point that Shiro's bleary eyes still catch when he's nearly coherent—everything to Lance is blurry and indecipherable in this moment. His world, now, is Shiro, needing his help. The only thing that matters is making sure that he doesn't bleed out here, cold and alone and so ready to just give up.

Lance doesn't know how to mend a broken person. He doesn't know

how to make an old painting look brand new. He isn't sure if someone like Shiro can ever be fixed, either, but he wants to make him comfortable.

And that, a the very least, he knows that he can do.

As the night drags on—endless and all-encompassing black—Lance hoists Shiro's dead weight up over his shoulders.

Slowly, with much struggling and even more looming regret, he drags him back to his own apartment. He tucks the cigarette box into Shiro's coat pocket. He forgets about the paper, soaked and ruined on the ground, for now. He figures that it'll still be there tomorrow. Right now, there are more important things to worry about, and little time to stop and worry about everything else that doesn't matter.

There's a first aid kit under the sink in the bathroom.

And his sister, he knows, listening to every suspicious sound that he makes when he turns his key and shoves open the door.

He tells Shiro to keep it down as he ushers him over the threshold. He has faith in Shiro—more than Keith, at least—to be subtle about this and to understand that he isn't exactly allowed to sneak random strangers into his apartment so late at night. Shiro isn't exactly the most normal guy by any means, but he imagines that maybe he's at least, at one point, been human. At least, in some distant past, Shiro remembers having parents or guardians who might have also gotten onto his case over bringing people home while the kids should be asleep.

He leads Shiro through the halls, around all of the scattered toys that he can see in the dark. When he pulls him into the bathroom, Shiro groans, noting quietly, dryly, that this bathroom is at least twice the size of the one in his own apartment.

"I should have splurged for a three-bedroom just for that tub," Shiro tells him, and Lance isn't exactly sure what that's meant to infer, but he doesn't pry.

Right now, before all else, before he asks any of his burning questions or takes advantage of this time that he's managed to get Shiro alone, out of public, out of the cold, he knows that he needs to focus on mending his wounds.

He shuffles Shiro over to the toilet. He's thankful to find that someone

has closed the lid, so he doesn't need to struggle with closing it while Shiro is growing slacker against him. When he manages to set him down, to situate him well enough that he feels confident that he won't fall once he pulls away, Lance focuses first on removing his coat. His cheeks burn as he does so, but his adrenaline is pumping quickly enough that he can thankfully ignore it.

He can ignore Shiro's broad shoulders, that thick chest. He can ignore the sliver of skin evident and pearly, perfectly soft white through the gap in the top buttons. He's careful with the single occupied sleeve. He pulls the fabric away from Shiro's wrist as he slides it off.

Then he tosses the coat behind him on the floor, pushing out a shaky breath and rubbing his hands together before ducking down in front of the counter and pulling open the cabinet.

Behind shampoo, bubble bath, a hairdryer with a frayed cord, he finds the first aid kit. He's relieved to find that the contents within it are completely intact. He lets out a slow breath. He closes his eyes for a single, quiet second. He tells himself that he can do this without messing it up. He can mend Shiro's wound. He can make this better.

There's no reason to be afraid of this—of Shiro, of Keith lurking somewhere outside in the dark. The only important thing right now is replacing those bandages. And later on, when Shiro is okay, he can start worrying about everything else.

When he unwinds the red-stained tourniquet from around Shiro's wrist, he isn't sure why he isn't more surprised to find the two deep puncture wounds still leaking blood underneath.

It's been long enough that he isn't even going to pretend that he hasn't figured out, at least, the most obvious aspects of Shiro and Keith's whole "spooky hot guy" routine. He's encountered enough peculiarities with the two of them that he feels as though he deserves to take some of these things at face value, without being expected to feign surprise. It's not like Shiro is awake enough to be suspicious anyway. And even if he were, Lance is positive that he could probably incapacitate him if he decides that Lance has suddenly learned too much, and feeding him to Keith is the only way to get out of this alive.

He clicks his tongue. The fact that they still haven't even considered killing him is a mystery that he isn't sure if he should even try getting to the bottom of. He imagines that turkeys pardoned by the President on Thanksgiving day are just thankful to be alive. There's no point in

asking for the answers, or bringing attention to just how stupid his potential killer's decision to spare him might be. At some point, he thinks, looking a gift horse in the mouth is just asking to be murdered, and for his own sake, he might just have to let this single mystery stay a mystery.

But Keith, apparently, doesn't extend that same courtesy to Shiro. And Lance is forced to wonder if perhaps this was some kind of punishment for not providing him with more consistent meals. It feels wrong to think so, and he can't stop himself from remembering the horror that had warped Keith's expression when he'd offered his own wrist.

It doesn't add up. He isn't sure how the same Keith who had balked at the idea of feeding from him could do something like this to Shiro. And he isn't sure why the puncture wounds are so clean, either.

If Shiro didn't go into this willingly, he imagines that there should have been signs of a struggle. But the marks are clear—a straight press of those sharp canines into Shiro's skin. And someone must have wrapped him up after. Someone must have cared enough to mend him the first time, even if they didn't stick around to change the bandages.

These thoughts swirl around in his head as he tosses the bandage from Shiro's arm into the trash. He reminds himself to bury it deeper underneath the toilet paper later on, just in case his sister gets especially nosy tomorrow and decides to go through the garbage too.

He's well aware of the fact that he broke his promise to her in less than twenty-four hours after making it, but this is important. If his sister knew what was going on right now—if he had any way to explain all of this to her without giving too much away—she would surely agree that Shiro, now, slipping in and out of consciousness and seemingly clinging just barely to the shrinking edges of life, needs to be here more than Lance needs to follow his own self-imposed rules.

And maybe later, he'll tell her that Shiro tripped and cut himself while walking home. Maybe he'll tell her that there was a mugging, or an accident, or something pertinent enough that she won't question why his knee-jerk reaction had been to drag this strange man back into their home after she'd just finished complaining about it.

But, for now, he thumbs through the first aid kit for everything that he might need for this. He pulls out the anti-bacterial wipes, a new set of bandages, and a few numbing salves that he thinks might give Shiro

comfort once he's regained consciousness and the pain hits him fully.

Lance remembers that there are some sugar cookies left in the cabinet that they didn't leave out for Santa. He'll grab those too, later on, because he remembers blood drives. He remembers volunteering to help with one when he was a teen, and how they'd offered snacks to anyone who felt like they were going to pass out, so maybe, somehow, sugary foods could help alleviate the lightheadedness that comes with rapid blood loss.

But he wonders if he could get away with that, too. If his sister would notice that the four cookies left of their batch that wouldn't fit on the plate are gone—and if maybe, he can just steal the offering to Santa instead. If he can claim to his sister later that he ate them while setting out the presents, or… he isn't so sure yet.

Right now, instead of worrying about the particulars of this cookie heist, he focuses on spraying anti-bacterial medicine on the punctures in Shiro's wrist. He tuts a little, turning a small smile up at Shiro as he slumps against the back of the toilet, and he pretends that all of this is less serious than it really is.

His sister taught him, a long time ago, just months after his niece was born, that when a child falls down, you shouldn't coddle them unless they're really hurt. You should say "oops!" instead, and maybe laugh. Maybe clap or cheer or scoop them up and kiss them, but you should never make them feel as though every misstep is a detrimental mistake. And he wonders if that trick will work now, too. Shiro already told him that he won't die, and for whatever reason, Lance chooses to believe him.

So he wonders if acting just as stressed about this as he really feels—berating Shiro for whatever stupid thing he did, prying and probing about why Keith must have chosen to feed from Shiro instead of taking Lance's offer days ago—if maybe all of that might be more damaging than Shiro needs right now.

He looks as though he just wants to go to sleep, and he barely reacts when Lance knows that the spray must sting in his wounds. His glassy eyes meet Lance's. Lance struggles to offer him a smile.

And Lance tells him, softly, "Keith got a pretty big Christmas dinner this year. He must have been *really* good, yeah?"

He isn't sure how he feels about the spit of a laugh that this draws out of Shiro. Partially, he revels in the victory of finally getting him to

admit, to some degree, that something inhuman is going on here. This marks the very first time that Shiro has ever even given him an inch as far as that uncharted territory goes.

But another part of him is worried—because why would Keith do this? Why would he keep going to the extent that Shiro can barely even walk, or talk, or stay vertical for longer than a few moments at a time? He feels a small flame of anger flicking inside of him, lit like a candle in a hurricane—barely there, but burning him all the same.

He's careful as he rubs the salve with two fingers around the edges of the punctures. This will numb the area for a short time, but he wonders if Shiro is coherent enough to take some medicine. If that's even a good idea when he's so thin on blood.

He decides to wait it out instead. By the looks of Shiro's arms—the small, faded silver of old pinprick scars dotting all the way up into his pushed-back sleeve, Lance decides that Shiro must be more accustomed to this than Lance himself is. If he doesn't seem particularly worried about this, maybe he's only sitting here and allowing Lance to mend him for Lance's sake. Maybe, if Lance weren't here, he'd be sleeping off this dizziness in a quiet house, with Keith full and contented, tucked away in his coffin or cocoon, or whatever he must wrap himself up in during the day.

But that raises the question, once again, of where Keith is. Shiro hasn't mentioned him since Lance dragged him back to his apartment, and even at the mention of him just moments ago, Shiro didn't offer any explanations.

Lance wonders if it would be too pushy to ask about him outright. He wonders if he'd even be able to get his desired answers that way. Shiro is loopy now, but he still seems tight-lipped. Lance isn't sure how deep that loyalty runs, and he isn't particularly curious enough to test it.

Before all else, Shiro is his friend. He's someone who Lance doesn't want to hurt now, no matter how desperately he'd love to get some information. Shiro is kind, and he's patient, and he's hurting. And Lance isn't low enough to use this moment of weakness against him.

He isn't cruel enough to trick him into badmouthing Keith, even if Keith really did nearly kill him before running away.

He wraps the new bandage around Shiro's wrist as he thinks about all of the places where Keith might have gone. He wasn't in the park. He

wasn't creeping around under any of the defunct street lamps. He might have been lingering in the shadows, or hunting through town, but he wasn't with Shiro before Shiro stumbled outside. He'd left him there to suffer alone, and Lance doesn't understand why.

Whoever wrapped the previous bandage seemed to have done a decent enough job that Lance suspects that it wasn't Shiro, half-aware and one-handed, bleeding out without the reach required to mend his own wrist. And they'd tied it off in a way that baffles Lance, even now. He uses tape to press the corners down, but before, he thinks that they might have tied it. He wonders how many times a person has to mend these sorts of wounds before they can use a bandage with such practiced finesse.

He wonders if someday, he might be able to become just as good at patching up Shiro after Keith makes a mess of him.

He ignores that thought. He doesn't like thinking about Shiro as nothing but the vampire-equivalent to cattle, but he's starting to suspect more and more that this might be the case.

So he breaks the silence, because his thoughts are being unkind.

He finishes taping the bandages, gives Shiro's wrist a gentle pat to show that he's finished, and when he pushes himself back to his heels, up to his feet, he extends a hand to wind around Shiro's elbow and help him up.

"So where did the moody guy go tonight anyway? Was he not full enough after that little meal, or…?"

Shiro seems to be coming to now, regaining color to his pallid cheeks faster than Lance thinks might be normal for someone else in his position. He'd seemed almost drained empty less than an hour ago, seemed as though he might have been heaving his final breaths as Lance half-dragged him up the stairs towards his apartment.

But his words swirl around in Lance's head now—he won't die. He can't. Not even if he wanted to.

Lance swallows thickly, forcing a smile as he looks around the room in search of something to distract his attention while Shiro regains his bearings and pulls himself up to sit straighter on the closed lid of the toilet.

"I'm not sure where he is," Shiro says then, slow and quiet, even and

almost all breath, “He was gone when I woke up, so… I don’t think he’ll hurt anyone, but I don’t know where he is. He might… be angry with me. I think I pushed him a little bit too hard this time.”

Lance doesn’t have the ability to comprehend what in the world he might mean by that. He isn’t equipped with enough knowledge about their situation to put all of these malformed pieces together into a cohesive, visible picture.

But he nods anyway, fiddling with the knobs on the sink, turning on the hot water, waiting for the steam to rise before he turns the knob for the cold.

Shiro always has a way of saying things that make him feel sick to his stomach. It’s something about how casually he mentions that Keith won’t kill anyone. How normal that must be for him. And it’s something about pushing Keith too hard—just a few short words that allude to something deeper, darker, something more sinister that must have happened between them, that maybe Shiro himself is so used to that he doesn’t understand how messed up all of this really is.

Lance knows that he went into this willingly. He knows that, even the very first night that he witnessed Keith climbing out of that car, he could tell that there was something off about him. He’d been terrified in that moment, but something had compelled him to keep pushing it. Something had kept him from listening to the more reasonable part of his brain and perhaps putting just enough distance between himself and these men that he’d never have to dither between continuing to dig himself deeper and deeper into this endless trench of mysteries and murder, and simply wiping his hands of the whole thing and pretending that none of this ever happened.

He can’t blame Keith anymore. He definitely can’t blame Shiro. He knows that the onus is on himself, alone, for reaching out to tangle his fingers in this spider’s web as though the black widow wasn’t always in plain sight.

But that doesn’t stop him from feeling as though he deserves some answers. He’s culpable now—has been since he cleaned up Shiro’s crime scene weeks ago—and, if he’s caught red-handed, helping conceal these murders, hiding information about the disappearance of that man, the police won’t care how little he knows once they realize what ugly things he’s done.

He shakes his head. He’s frustrated in this position, but Shiro is in no

fit state to explain things. No matter how helplessly he needs this information, he knows that he won't learn anything particularly helpful right now.

But maybe, later on, when Shiro feels better, he'll realize just how far Lance is willing to go to help them. And maybe then, after all this time, he'll be more willing to explain things.

When it seems that the temperature of the water has eased into lukewarm, he sticks his hands underneath the spray, washing the residual salve from the tips of his fingers.

He turns off the sink before he reaches to his left to dry his hands on the towel hanging on the rack there. From his spot here, if he shifts just a little, he can see the corner of Shiro's white hair poking into the reflection of the mirror. He's suddenly hit with a wave of realization—that he's alone here with the guy who he's been crushing on for weeks now. That he's cramped in this tiny space just as he had been with Keith, and he could do anything here: he could confess that he's been carrying these growing feelings all this time. He could demand that Shiro answer all of his questions. He could make a home for himself on Shiro's big, open thighs pressed against the toilet lid. But instead, he jerks forward just as Shiro pushes himself up, trying to stand, and instead falls on unsteady legs, unable to grasp the edge of the counter before he tumbles to the floor.

Lance catches him just in time, thankfully. But Shiro is so heavy that Lance almost topples down right along with him.

He laughs a nervous, fretful laugh. He reaches up to brush some of the hair from Shiro's face, just to make sure that he's okay. A touch to his forehead reveals that he's running a hot fever. His skin feels as though there's fire licking just beneath the surface of it.

"Th—thank you Lance," Shiro chokes out, fumbling with his single arm to find the counter and pulling away slightly when his palm drops against it, "I—I should go, if you… if you can just help me to the door, I can… I can get out of your hair."

Lance makes a split-second decision that he can feel, even in the moment, that he's going to regret later. He'll pay for this when his sister wakes up and realizes that he's not alone in his room. She'll surely give him the world's biggest earful when he reveals to her that he's invited over a night guest—not only after she asked him not to, or to warn her, at the very least before he does anything similar, but on

Christmas Day, of all days, when the children will be home for the duration of it, and surely they won't understand. He won't have the opportunity to sneak Shiro out without them noticing. He won't have the chance to explain to them that sometimes adults have other adult friends, and sometimes they sleep together, and it's okay. It's normal. Uncle Lance is just friends with the spooky guy who blacks out his windows. Uncle Lance just has sleepovers with attractive men, and there's nothing weird about it!

They're still not old enough for the birds and the bees conversation yet. Maybe Lance could convince her to tell them that Shiro is just his friend—because he is—staying the night because he's sick— *because he is* —and there was nothing at all "funny" going on between them during the night—because there wasn't.

But he can already tell how unbelievable that's going to sound. Without explaining everything to her, he isn't sure how he can convince her that he really only asked Shiro to sleep over out of necessity, but he refuses to consider those problems when he offers.

When he tells Shiro that he's not letting him go home alone tonight, even Shiro looks at him as though he's crazy. But Shiro himself isn't in a position to argue. He's too weak to fight Lance even if he had the inner strength to do so. He just nods, weakly, tiredly, and maybe with some subtle relief. And he allows Lance to hoist the crook of his arm over his shoulder, to walk awkwardly while carrying most of his weight, and to flip off the light before the two of them try desperately to stay as quiet as possible as Lance leads Shiro towards his room.

Thankfully, they don't run into any issues before Lance closes his bedroom door behind them. Shiro's smile in the dark is iridescent. It's hard to look away from. He's flicking his glassy gaze about Lance's room, taking in the posters on the walls, the books on the floor—the desk chair pulled close under the desk, the closed laptop humming as the fan cools it, and the photos of his family, smiling once, happy, in dusty frames, sitting on a shelf just above it.

He's breathing in a stilted, pained sort of way. Lance knows that, despite the fact that he's healing a lot faster than a human probably should, he still isn't in the best shape.

So he helps him walk to the bed. He's as gentle as he can be as he hoists his weight onto the top of it.

Shiro makes as though to fiddle with his shoes, but Lance shoos his

hands away. And he's faced, suddenly, with the realization of just how intimate undressing another person can be.

His cheeks burn as he tugs apart the knot of Shiro's laces.
His hands tremor as he pulls each shoe over his heels. And he sets them gently next to the bed, careful to make as little noise as possible. As an afterthought, he paces over to the door and turns the lock. He doesn't even want to consider how angry his sister would be if his niece or nephews came into his room in their holiday excitement tomorrow and saw Shiro slumbering in his bed. He doesn't even want to consider how he'd never live that one down, even long after Keith and Shiro might be gone, off on some new adventure, leaving him behind to pick up all of these scattered pieces. How he'd probably be trapped under her thumb for the rest of his miserable life if only to pay her back for subjecting her children to such an unexpected sight. And so many unwelcome life lessons that they probably won't be ready to learn for another few years.

It's not his fault that his sister never dated after her boyfriend left, he thinks. And it's definitely not his fault that he hasn't had the opportunity to invite someone over this late until now. If he had better game, maybe his young relatives would have been introduced to the concept of their parental figures dating even earlier. If he wasn't such a hopeless loser, maybe this sort of thing would be so normal by now that he wouldn't even have to stress out about what they'd think of it.

He huffs, shaking his head to clear those thoughts. He can hear Shiro moving on the bed, the springs groaning under his weight. He can see the moon pouring in light through his open curtains, and the shadows cast from Shiro between them, moving along the floor.

It's quiet here, save for his own breathing and those springs. It's suddenly peaceful, after the stress and calamity of today. In this moment, abruptly, there's calm. Outside of his door, in the living room, the Christmas tree twinkles. He'll wake up in a few hours to place the gifts underneath it. He'll grab the cookies for Shiro. He'll tuck the cute little note that his sister wrote "from Santa" under the plate.

He'll figure out what to tell his sister about Shiro. He'll explain to her as well as he can exactly what compelled him to shake up their Christmas tradition with the addition of a new, unfamiliar body.

But for now, it's a calm and silent night. For now, Shiro has stilled,

and Lance's heart has stopped pounding. There's no sound but the wind pushing the windows, but the distant cars shoving through snow in the streets. And Lance's thoughts, troubled, pinned to the man in his bed. To the creature in the night.

To the bloody bandages in the bathroom trash can, and how he possibly managed to get himself so wrapped up in all of it.

He makes his way back to Shiro, who's struggling to scoot just a little bit further onto the bed. Lance lifts his legs, shifting them towards the center before setting them down more gently, sliding his hands under Shiro's shoulders and helping him scoot further over to straighten himself out. He stops, with hot cheeks, and asks meekly, "Do… do you want your pants off too, or…?"

Shiro's smile is sleepy, and Lance can't see if his face grows any darker in the lightless black. But he imagines that maybe Shiro's opinion of him is high enough after everything that they've been through that he knows that he isn't trying to make any moves now. This is strictly for Shiro's benefit—purely altruistic, he thinks. And he trusts that Shiro understands that as well.

"I'll be okay," Shiro tells him, reaching his hand upward, brushing his fingers against Lance's warm cheek, "I've been sleeping in a bathtub for the last thirty years. I promise, this feels like a major upgrade—pants or no pants."

Lance laughs—a small, fluttery thing. He finds himself leaning into Shiro's touch, feeling strangely familiar in such a foreign, intimate situation. He's bent forward now, one knee on the bed. His hands rest, palms down, just centimeters away from Shiro's waist. He remembers, with faint panic, that he forgot Shiro's coat on the bathroom floor, but right now, in the serenity and novelty of his current situation, he can't bring himself to care enough to pull away.

"You could sleep here more often," He says then, feeling childish and hopeless, desperate and silly, "I mean… beats the tub, right? I'm sure we could find a nice place for Keith too, if… if he ever wants to see me again."

Shiro laughs at that, curling his fingers in the edges of Lance's hair, dangling down into his face. He seems so out of it now—barely hanging on—and Lance feels almost guilty for allowing this moment to carry on. He imagines that Shiro, ever the gentleman, might feel as though he's overstepped a boundary if he remembers this moment

tomorrow. He can already imagine how mortified he'll be, how he'll feel guilty for leading Lance on, for doing this to Keith.

But he can't stop himself from wondering if maybe Shiro won't. If he's looking for a way out now. If he's trying to move on.

And Lance doesn't know if he wants to pursue this without Keith. He doesn't know if there's a way to enter this relationship with all three of them, but there are weirder things going on here than three men falling in love with each other. There are far more bizarre aspects to all of this than Lance admiring Shiro's beauty in the moonlight, while also worrying about Keith.

Shiro's eyes are slipping closed now. His hand is sliding down Lance's face, slack until Lance catches it in his own, holding it close to his chest.

"You're…" Shiro's voice is a soft, lilting thing. It's ocean waves. It's cigarette smoke rising and fading into black night air. "You're an amazing person, Lance… I don't… I don't want to hurt you."

And that's good, Lance thinks, if only he hadn't decided long ago that he'd already be dead if either Shiro or Keith wanted that. He still isn't sure what the benefit is of keeping him alive. He knows that it would be more than easy for one of them to grab him during his trek back home from work in the middle of the night—to kill him there, to take off under the cover of darkness, never to be seen or heard from again.

He doesn't know why Shiro never made a move to hunt him. He doesn't know why Keith seemed so horrified when he offered his wrist.

But Shiro is beautiful now—soft and sleepy and so warm to the touch. He's drifting off into a much-needed sleep. His wide chest is rising and falling evenly, more healthy than it had when Lance had dragged him from the courtyard into his apartment.

He sits still, perched on the edge of the bed, for a long time once Shiro falls asleep. He holds Shiro's big hand in both of his, fingers pressed into the palm, lips curling into a smile when Shiro closes that hand around his, holding it loosely. Shiro needs someone to want him, Lance knows that. He needs someone to care.

He's teetering on the edge of giving up. He's pushed forward valiantly. He's seen terrible things that have dissolved any sense of warmth within him—anything happy, or pure, or good that might have once

rested there.

Lance doesn't know if he's the right person for this job. He doesn't know if he's good enough to help Shiro, smart enough to gain Keith's trust.

If he can mend the broken parts of either of them. If he can bring some light into their never-ending night.

But he wants to try.

To see Shiro's beautiful smile, to someday make Keith laugh. It's worth everything else. In this moment, he realizes profoundly—they're worth it, all of it. And he'd do anything that it took to help them.

He watches Shiro's open lips. so full and soft and kissable. The angular slope of his high cheekbones, the sharp line of his chin, the ivory glow of his skin, shimmering like snow in the dim light.

He imagines that maybe he's brave enough to climb into bed and fall asleep, pressed against Shiro's side. He pretends that this is normal, and Shiro will be here again tomorrow night, that nothing is ruined now that he's overstepped a few dozen boundaries just to get here.

And he imagines how it must feel to curl up in one of this complex's tiny bathtubs, how Keith might feel, as a small, bird-boned thing curled in on himself in sleep. How it might feel to find himself wrapped up in both of them—Keith, frail and barely breathing in his arms. Shiro, big and warm and firm against his back.

He imagines that he could be smart enough to go with them, the next time that they leave. He imagines the freedom of cutting the tethers that bind him to this empty, directionless life.

He imagines how it might feel to kiss Shiro now, how smooth his lips might be. How soft it must feel.

And he's leaning forward without realizing it. His heart is thumping restlessly in his chest. Shiro's face is still, his lashes are thick and pale. There's a long, faint scar stretched over the length of his nose that Lance has never noticed before.

He doesn't rouse when Lance comes closer. He doesn't jerk awake, or push Lance away, or demand to know why he's hovering so near now. But Lance, as though in a trance, can't stop himself from coming

closer.

Close enough that his eyelashes brush against Shiro’s cheek—

He’s jolted from this moment by a rhythmic rapping on his window.

Chapter 9

Lance stops, blood suddenly run cold as he hovers just above Shiro's slumbering face. He can feel Shiro's warm breath fanning out over his skin, can feel the thrumming of life gradually fading back into him, and the subtle rise and fall of his chest as he breathes, jostling the mattress under Lance's knees ever so slightly.

It's dark in his bedroom. Dark and quiet and so terribly secluded from the rest of the outside world. A room away, his niece sleeps in her room. She has no idea what lingers just outside of her uncle's bedroom window. She has no clue what sorts of nightmares gnash their teeth and scurry just beyond the human eye in the thick blanket of the black night.

He wonders what his family would say if they found him dead here in the morning. He wonders if they'd hold a candlelight vigil in his honor, if they'd search tirelessly for his killer. Or if he'd be more similar to that missing man—a faded smile on a filthy missing person poster. A bruise on this town's history that's healed over yellow. Not quite tender to the touch anymore, even just weeks later.

He isn't sure how he feels about dying infamously. He doesn't know if that's better or worse than slipping into quiet obscurity. At least he might retain his dignity then. At least his death might not ruin his young relatives for the rest of their lives, in the same way that his parents' deaths ruined him.

There are three more raps against the window, in a succession quick enough that it alleviates any doubt that Lance might have had that it could be the wind, or an animal, or even a stray branch rubbing against the glass.

It reminds him of the leaky pipes in the walls, of how they used to creak and groan in the night. How the tiny rodents taking cover from the winter would scurry about in there—and how he, as a child, would stay up late in the night, plagued with nightmares that a human was climbing around in there, watching him and waiting.

Back then, the most terrifying thing that Lance could think of was another person who wanted to hurt him. And right now, he isn't so sure of that anymore.

In his current predicament, he knows that there's no way that any person could scale the side of the building to catch him in his bedroom on the third floor, just as he understands that no human could see him moving about in here in the dark.

He'd tried to climb the building once or twice when he was younger. When he'd found himself vibrating with pent-up energy and he'd thought that, with enough determination, he could take on the entire world. His fingernails had scraped and broken in the fibers of the bricks. A few other young people from the complex had gathered around to watch him attempt this harrowing feat. He hadn't made it more than a few feet above the ground before he fell off, hard, onto his back in the slow-thawing snow. His sister was horrified when she caught sight of the bruises later. It had taken every bit of his wit to convince her that no one was bullying him or abusing him at school.

He's lived in this place for far too long. There aren't any mysteries to be uncovered here anymore. He knows that the scratching in the walls is raccoons or squirrels roosting here for warmth in the night. He knows that the bumps are water pushing through the frozen pipes. He knows that a person couldn't possibly reach him on the top floor, and he knows that, even if they could, they couldn't see well enough in the dark to watch him without his knowledge, as he continues to lean over Shiro on the bed.

But a human isn't what he's worried about now. The worst being that might witness him in this tender, forbidden moment is exactly the creature who he knows is the most capable of actually doing it. The thing that watches him through the glass isn't a person with bad intentions. It isn't a serial killer, it isn't a crazy person.

It's a monster, and it almost killed its keeper last night.

He knows that he doesn't stand a chance here. Unlike Shiro, he knows with absolute certainty that he can actually die.

For a moment, he does nothing. He screws his eyes shut, holding his breath and grasping his fists hard in the sheets beneath him. He feels as though there are eyes watching him from every dark corner. He feels as though there are voices whispering just out of earshot. He's overcome with a chill that soaks deep into the marrow of his bones. It crawls in the form of a shiver up his spine. It wraps its icy fingers around his heart, then his lungs, and strangles the slow draw of breath rattled out of him, the sputter of his pulse pounding frantically within

the confines of his ribs. He imagines that maybe this is just like the monsters that he used to think lurked under his bed as a kid. His dad used to tell him to close his eyes, pull the blanket over his head, and count to ten. He used to tell him to keep counting until they went away.

His dad had convinced him that monsters were afraid of numbers. If you counted enough, eventually they would get scared and go bug some other kid. And he knows now that his father was just trying to fool him into putting himself to sleep. He knows that none of that was real, and his parents couldn't have possibly known that real monsters were really hiding in the darkest corners of the world. That one would visit their son long after they were dead and buried and so frightfully helpless to protect him.

He's troubled by the thought, once again, of what either of them would think about this. He thinks about his mother's face when he'd rescued a stray cat from the tumultuous ocean waters during a storm. She'd watched him as he'd carried it into their kitchen, wrapped in the towel that he'd brought with him to the beach. There had been something resting in her eyes, a look as though she was lost. She'd been chopping vegetables for dinner as she told him that they couldn't keep it. That night, their stew had contained celery cut so finely that it was practically a powder.

They could barely keep their own heads above water back then. And Lance, too, is drowning. She used to tell him that a person needs to take care of themselves before helping others. She used to tell him that he had a kind heart.

But that creature is waiting for him just outside. It's a wall away from his niece, dreaming peacefully in her room. Shiro's hands, his soul, his heart, they're stained with the burn of his past sins. The murders. The secrets. The lies.

Lance has brought evil here. He feels pinned under that realization now. He's brought danger into his house, welcomed it with open arms.

Keith isn't a helpless stray cat. He's not a kid at school who no one talks to. He's not a baby bird fallen from the nest, a lost dog, a sea turtle caught on rubbish on the beach.

Keith could kill all of them easily.

And Lance, driven by his own selfish, foolish need to be the hero in every single story of his life, reached out to him, invited him in. Whatever happens to him tonight, he realizes that he deserves it.

He can only hope that Keith will spare his family. He can only hope that even the slightest traces of humanity remain somewhere in that black, unbeating heart.

He forces himself to calm down. He's toeing the threshold of a panic attack now. He reclaims control of his breathing. He counts. He tells himself that everything will be okay. He leans over Shiro, protectively, or terrified, he isn't sure. And comforts himself desperately, struggles to convince himself that this very real situation is entirely in his head.

The tapping continues, and it grows even more fretful and quick. It seems as though it's paced in just the right way to alert him, as though the owl just outside of it, the branch or wind or hale currently vying for his attention has somehow gained the sentience to make itself as obnoxious as possible.

Lance takes a deep breath. He pushes himself back, planting one foot, then two, on the floor. He stands with only one side of him facing the window, training his eyes on Shiro's slumbering form as though he might make a miraculous recovery for the sole purpose of protecting Lance now. But he only sleeps, only continues breathing slowly as though he has no idea what danger Lance is in now—the trouble that he's caused. The terrible, inhuman fate that will befall Lance all because he stumbled out to meet him last night.

The ruin that he'd wished on an innocent human and his family, all because he'd been stupid enough to be kind.

Which isn't fair, Lance thinks, but he's desperate now. He wishes that he would have considered this outcome when he'd so foolishly dragged Shiro into his apartment, but he knows, deep down, that he would have done it anyway.

He remembers, just in time, that as long as he doesn't open the window, it's not like his visitor can break the glass. It's not like he can come in here without the threat of some mysterious force keeping him outside of a home without an invitation.

It's not like he can hurt Lance, as long as Lance… never has to leave his apartment at night ever again, for the rest of his miserable life.

He considers the possibility of getting a day job. He thinks about how difficult it would be to move. These thoughts bubble up and recede, each dumber than the one before it, each more outlandish and despairing as his brain quickly runs thin on options.

There isn't a circus that's willing to travel all the way up to the mountains to put on a show in the freezing cold, but he's thinking about being a clown. Or a fire eater. Or the guy who combs the wolf man's fur, who seduces the bearded lady, whose schtick is falling in love with the inhuman, when clearly no one else in the world can appreciate the beauty that lies in their oddity.

He understands that he has nowhere to run now, in this moment. Even if he could pack up and move far away, even if he could save his life and the lives of his family tomorrow, there's still the issue of Shiro, sleeping peacefully on his bed. There's still Keith just outside of his window, waiting for him to come over and talk to him.

There's still getting through the rest of tonight and cleaning up the mess that he's made here. He's realized, way too late, that he's dug himself into a hole so deep that he might not have enough time to climb out of it.

So he turns, gradually and with every ounce of the courage slowly building in his chest. And the sight that meets him through the glass knocks the wind out of him, no matter how much he was expecting it, no matter how many deep breaths he's taken, or how many times he's counted, or how long he's sat here, building himself up for this exact moment. He still isn't prepared to see the silhouette of a human, dark and moving through the window. He isn't ready for the pads of fingers streaking crimson against the glass, the glow of those inhuman eyes in the dark. And another knock, loud and forceful, as though Keith really might try to shatter it, as though he thinks that somehow Lance still hasn't noticed him.

Lance has no idea how he's managed to perch himself so gracefully on the half-inch, at best, of sill available on the other side of the window.

But he rattles out another breath, biting his lip and taking a short, hesitant step forward.

Keith's dark shape motions as though to ask him to lift the window. And Lance realizes that he has no way to communicate all of the

reasons why that's a bad idea without yelling. He flails his hands about in wide motions then. He mouths the words that he wants to say in a gradual, dramatic way. His breath is pushing out with every word, and despite the fact that he's trying his best, he knows that "I—ahm—not-guhnnah-let-you-een-beecause-you-weel-huuuurt-me" surely looks more to Keith like he's having some kind of face journey than attempting to articulate actual words. He can't see Keith's expression, but he pushes himself back slightly. He pauses for a long moment, staring at Lance as nothing but an indecipherable blob of black that Lance can still feel shaming him. Then he shakes the dark mass of his head, as though to tell him that he really didn't manage to understand even one bit of that.

Lance sighs, throwing his hands up in the air. He's ready to just throw in the towel and go to bed, ready to accept whatever consequences come with ignoring Keith now if only so he won't have to keep playing an especially infuriating game of charades with him, before he catches sight of something just out of the corner of his eye. On his nightstand, just after he'd finished studying for his last final in his online classes, he'd banished one of the many notebooks where he'd kept all of the information that he needed to remember. It's filled only halfway with a few pages of sloppily-scrawled information about microbiology. He hasn't touched it since he needed it, and conveniently, he'd left a pen still tucked between the final pages when he'd last set it down.

He leans over just far enough to grab it. His feet don't move from their current place in front of Keith, but he strains his arms to reach far enough over until his fingers catch on the metal spiral of the binding. He feels ridiculous but also pinned. He feels claustrophobic under the spell that Keith often casts over him. Limited, almost, to the small amount of free will that he suspects that he has now. And wondering, pitifully, how much of this is just in his head.

But Keith's eyes feel like cold chains, reaching through the window and pulling him forward. He feels a certain obligation to stand here until Keith is done with him, to explain himself, to put on this theater of free will, despite the fact that they both might know very well that he's going to inevitably let Keith in.

It's just a matter of time, he thinks. It's just how long it might take before he can fool himself into thinking that this was all his own idea.

He shakes his head, pulling the pen from between the pages and

flipping through the notebook until he finds some free space to write. In big, bold letters, he scratches out a message.

If Keith is any monster worth his salt, he'll be able to read this in the dark, Lance thinks. If he can't? Well, Lance tried anyway, and morning is drawing only closer. The sun will rise soon, Keith will be banished back to his bathtub coffin, Shiro will be safe to live another day without being drained completely, and Lance will be left to feel the looming dread of the next nightfall, spared temporarily by the small, comforting idea that he won't have to leave the house after dark for another week.

But it seems, when he holds the notebook close to the window, that Keith can, in fact, see it well in the dark.

He isn't sure if he's more disappointed, or more impressed that Keith is, in fact, the real deal. As though everything that he's seen within the last couple of months hasn't been screaming to him, with absolute certainty, that Keith is anything but human.

But he holds the message close to the glass for a few uneasy moments, waiting with bated breath for Keith's response.

The words are simple, scrawled messily in his haste and terror:

Don't hurt me.

Lance can't see Keith's expression when he reads it, but something about his sagging shoulders expresses his reaction just fine. Despite how guilty Lance suddenly feels for hurting his feelings, despite how much of a hypocrite he feels like for seeking Keith out all this time, overstepping boundaries with him, making him uncomfortable, but rebuffing him the moment that he shows his face again—he still flips the page and writes another message. It's longer than the first, less scratched in, neater and smaller now that he knows that Keith can see it.

And it's softer, more considerate. He forces himself to consider the fact that he's gone about this all wrong. That maybe he's misunderstood what happened between Keith and Shiro earlier. Maybe Keith is just worried about his closest friend.

Do you want to check on him?

When he turns the paper over, Keith nods to him, tapping a few quick, light affirmations as though he finally understands just how little time he has before the sun rises. He's twitchy now, repositioning himself on the sill as though he's ready to somersault into Lance's room the moment that he's given that much-needed invitation. Lance tries not to think about how eager he seems. He tries to tell himself that it doesn't hurt his heart, to consider how helpless Keith is in this situation to explain himself when surely Lance has it all wrong.

So he makes a gamble. He bets on the most unlikely scenario, the one that feels the most unlikely in his head, but the most right in his heart. He sets the notebook down on the nightstand once again. He spares a short look in Shiro's direction, wondering if this is a disservice to him —if somehow it might be detrimental to his continued existence if Lance were to actually let Keith inside. He isn't sure what to think about any of this, doesn't know if Keith caused Shiro's wounds purposefully or on accident, and why he'd waste the time to check up on him if he really didn't care if Shiro lived or died.

But he feels compelled to believe Keith, even before he has a chance to argue his defense. He feels, for whatever reason, as though turning Keith away from the window and refusing to allow him to see Shiro before morning might be a needlessly cruel thing for him to do.

So he builds up his resolve. He draws in a few slow, shaky breaths. He convinces himself that Keith surely isn't angry with him. Keith, perhaps, might even be relieved that someone else saw Shiro in pain and cared enough to reach out and help him.

No matter how scary Keith is, no matter how inhuman he might be, Lance realizes—as he steps toward the window and flips the lock— that Keith really hasn't given him a single reason so far to actually be afraid of him. To believe that he might hurt him.

To feel this nervous as he slides his fingers under the window sill and pushes it up, shivering in the cold, even though he still hasn't had a moment to take off his own coat.

Keith doesn't make a move to climb in. He's still shadowed in the window, still perched on the ledge. He watches Lance silently for a moment, before turning his head as though to look at Shiro on the bed. He seems as though he's being held back from even placing a singer finger inside of the room. He seems as though he's waiting for something, and it takes Lance a few silent, awkward moments too

long to figure out what exactly that thing might be.

Right, he needs to be invited. Lance hadn't realized before now that he actually needed to be invited every single time.

And he wonders, before he clears his throat to say something, if Shiro has to stay awake so late after his shifts end because he, too, has to invite Keith back into their apartment every morning when he's done creeping through the night.

Lance shakes his head. He rubs both of his hands together, taking a short step back to give Keith some space to climb inside.

"You can come in," he says, low and lilting, jittery with the nervousness and the chilly air pouring in from outside and soaking into his clothing, "Shiro's sleeping, but… you can come in."

Keith nods once, a short jerk of his shadowed chin down, and then back up. He slides a hand through the window, bracing it against the wall. And when he presses a single leg into the room, Lance is surprised to find that it's far less skinny that he was expecting. Keith, on his feet gracefully within moments, is less waifish than Lance remembers him. In the moonlight, the shine of light against his hair doesn't reflect dull and brassy. And even in the dark, the deep caverns that Lance is all-too-familiar seeing circled under his eyes have faded into something healthier, livelier, too smooth to be human but too pretty to terrify Lance as his sorry state might have triggered his animalistic instincts to shirk away before.

Keith, now, looks like a life-sized doll. He looks every bit of the seductive vampire role that Lance might have compared him to before.

He's taller and more filled out now. He isn't perpetually marked by the dark bruises of exhaustion that had stained the skin beneath his eyes, in the hollows of his cheeks. His complexion isn't dry or cracked, or even as thin as it used to be. He isn't wearing the filthy coat either. He's dressed in only an oversized t-shirt that dangles just above his knees. Lance swallows heavily when he takes in the way that the moon reflects iridescent blue against those firm, ivory thighs. How Keith's suddenly shapely calves bend upwards into them. How his hips are fuller now, more rounded. How the thin fabric of his shirt clings to the subtle slope of his hips into his flat belly, into a thick chest and wide shoulders, and a long, pearly throat.

And Lance realizes, abruptly and profoundly, how Keith might have managed to seduce Shiro into following behind him for so many years now. This beautiful, haunting, supernatural creature—it moves and breathes and talks like a human. But it's far too smooth, too graceful. Keith lopes through the dark as though fastened by marionette strings, as though he's being pulled forward, gliding through air. As though his feet don't even touch the floor.

Lance is in awe of him. For a long moment, as Keith places a knee on the bed and leans forward to inspect Shiro, Lance can't even find the strength to breathe.

The shirt hitches higher up the back of his thighs. It's pulled up by the motion, by the strain of him bending forward. Lance forces his eyes away from all of the soft skin revealed underneath. He nearly bites his tongue when he gets an accidental eyeful, reminding himself frantically that he's supposed to be afraid right now. Berating himself mentally for allowing his libido to push out any survival instincts that might still exist within him.

Keith is leaning close to Shiro now, and Lance can only watch in silence as he does so. He can't see what Keith is doing, with his back turned in the dark, and the realization hits him suddenly, like ice water dumped over him, that perhaps he should be more concerned with what Keith came in here to do.

But he doesn't seem as desperate or as hungry as Lance has ever seen him. He seems every bit as supernatural and almost heavenly as Lance would have imagined prior to meeting him that a vampire would always be.

He knows that this Keith could be this Keith all the time. If somehow, Keith could feed often just as much as he fed last night, he'd never wither away again. He wouldn't tremble from the weight of standing on his own two feet. He wouldn't be pale, or skinny, bird-boned or nearly starved to only skin and bone.

Lance realizes that this Keith must be the Keith who Shiro fell in love with.

And it will be a very, very long time before he realizes that he's wrong.

But in this moment, as Keith leans over Shiro and seems now to be inspecting him, Lance finally garners the inner strength required and the synapses popping in his brain to move his body forward, then around, so he can get a better look without the distraction of that terribly revealing t-shirt jumbling his thoughts. Keith jerks his chin slightly upward, brows scrunching together as his eyes meet Lance's. His lips are a thin, white line. Lance can see him clearer now, with the moonlight pouring in with the frigid air through the open window. He can see the pretty lavender of Keith's eyes that once seemed drowned out by black. He can see the rosy hue at the apples of his cheeks, the pretty peach shade of his lips. The perfectly crafted arch of his features, arranged perfectly together to create perhaps the most attractive face that Lance has ever seen.

He feels pinned under Keith's gaze. He feels as though he's meeting him all over again, for the very first time.

Keith's fingers are ghosting over Shiro's mended wrist. Another hand is rested gently on his chest—pushing up slow breaths, still sleeping away the pain and dizziness of his near-death earlier in the night. Lance spots a wet glassiness in Keith's eyes, sees a quiver of his lip so quick that it might have just been a trick of the shadows catching in the moonlight.

But Keith's expression softens, and he turns back to stare at Shiro's peaceful, slack expression.

"Thank you," Keith tells him, and even his voice is stronger than it ever was. Even his words sound clearer and more focused, as though they're coming from human lips and not seeping from the shadows all around them as they had before, "He kept telling me to keep going. I —I wasn't paying enough attention, and when I eat, I can't… I can't stop myself until it's too late. There was a part of me—"

He bites his lip, and Lance can barely make out the exaggerated points of his canines in the dark. Keith doesn't look at Lance, doesn't look at Shiro either. He turns his face to the window, the moon catching the glossy strands of his hair—casting blue light over him that settles so beautifully in all of the dark hollows of his arms, the bend of his knees, the rise of those fuller hips and shapely thighs. The mysterious kaleidoscope of sparkling colors now vibrant in his watery eyes.

Keith looks like an angel, sitting here, fallen from heaven to take shelter in Lance's small and undeserving bedroom. Lance feels

suddenly as though he isn't evil, isn't terrifying—as though Lance himself has mistaken something heavenly for something satanic.

But the quiver of Keith's voice gives away his own humanity. It grounds him as a living creature, as a tangible, real thing. As a creature with emotions that can hurt him, with thoughts and feelings and a storm of his own brewing deep within his heart.

His voice is small and so quiet that it's barely even there.

"When I could tell that I'd gone too far… there was a part of me that almost didn't stop. As though... it was more humane to finally let him die. But… I'm selfish. And… I didn't want to be alone. I can't… I don't think I can do this alone."

Lance feels as though he should be capable of doing more right now than he does. He doesn't fly forward and wrap Keith up in his arms. He doesn't reassure him that everything will be okay, that Shiro wants to live, that it was an accident, and neither of them did it on purpose. He doesn't offer Keith the pretty lies that will make everything feel okay. He doesn't put a band-aid on this awful situation or attempt to bluff his way through the act of understanding even the slightest part of what Keith and Shiro might be going through right now.

He doesn't trust himself to be a rock that Keith can hold on to. He doesn't feel strong enough or smart enough, or even remotely informed enough to make all of this go away. Instead, he stands here, uselessly, lax and rubbery and still, watching as Keith leans further forward and ghosts his lips over Shiro's forehead. He's trembling, ever so slightly, his eyes still glassy and wide in the dark.

But he's beautiful in this sadness—more alive and thrumming with energy than Lance has ever seen him. And Lance realizes that Keith is just as dangerous now as a well-fed shark. He's a monster, something terrible and horrifying that no person would ever want to meet alone at night. But right now, under the weight of his regret, he's nothing but a boy, helpless and sorry, mourning the fact that he hurt someone who he's supposed to love.

Lance doesn't understand it entirely. He can tell now that Keith cares about Shiro a lot, perhaps more than he cares about anyone in the entire world. But he won't accept him. He won't let him close. Even if at one point they might have been together, something changed, Keith pushed Shiro away, and the two of them are still floundering in the

aftermath of that.

Lance doesn't get it. He doesn't know why their entire lives seem to revolve around depriving themselves of what they really want.

But he finally finds the strength to draw forward. He swallows his fears, forces himself to stop shaking. And he places a gentle, comforting hand on Keith's shoulder, forcing a smile when Keith flinches and jerks his head up to look at him.

Lance doesn't apologize. He feels no fear at this moment, no animalistic urges begging him to run far away, to revoke his invitation to allow Keith in his house, to make him take Shiro with him, or for the two of them to stay away forever. If only so his life can continue on with some semblance of its prior normalcy.

Instead of anything smart, anything that might preserve his previous life, he brings himself down to sit at the unoccupied corner of the bed, just inches away from Keith. He allows his hand to slip from Keith's shoulder down to the mattress. It's still for only a brief moment, before he ghosts it over the sheets, pulling it up over Shiro's body and resting lightly on his side. It's settled next to Keith's now, just centimeters away. Neither of them mentions it, but both of their gazes settle there. Lance's skin is darker and more human. The cuff of his coat snags in the buttons on Shiro's shirt. Keith's naked arm is hairless, poreless, just as it's always been. His fingers are smaller and more nimble than Lance's. He has small hands, frail even now that he's revitalized. Lance revels in the knowledge of just how much damage those little hands can do.

He pulls himself from his thoughts gradually. He isn't sure how he feels about this situation, how comfortable it is to sit here with the sleeping Shiro and the quiet Keith. How desperately he wishes that his nights could be filled with moments like this. With the three of them huddled together in the dark, enjoying a wordless company that feels more comfortable and warm than any blanket that Lance could wrap around himself.

And he says, low, slowly, "You care about him. That's why you feel bad. You… you don't want him to suffer, right? You think that living with you is making him suffer?"

Keith flicks his gaze away. He stares at Shiro's slumbering face long and hard, unmoving and focused in a way that makes Lance

momentarily curious about what his mind might be considering in this moment.

Keith turns his face back then, just as Lance begins to speak again.

He watches Lance, and Lance feels compelled to keep going—to keep talking until his words snag on something jagged in Keith's heart that they can slowly begin to mend.

"I know… I know that I don't understand even half of what's going on between both of you, but… but Shiro loves you—he loves you a lot. And he isn't miserable because he's stuck with you. He's miserable because… because you won't let him in. Like, he'd do anything for you, right? I mean, he's killing people for you. He's… he's murdering people just so you can eat. If that's not a sign that he loves you, I don't know what it."

Keith tips his head to the side, his lips cracked open slightly, his jaw slack. His brows push together in confusion, and for a moment, he seems as though he might argue. Lance isn't sure which part of that statement might have confused him, but he presses on anyway—unaware of how much closer he's drawing as he speaks until Keith's face is so close to his that they could kiss, if either of them moved forward even another inch.

He can make out the flecks of violet in Keith's dark eyes vividly. Like shattered gemstones, like painted shards of glass. He feels lost in them, drowning in the intoxication of this moment. Keith is not warm, and he barely breathes at all. He's so much quieter than any human would be, even more silent than Shiro's heaving, sleepy breaths just a few inches away.

"I wanna help you," Lance says then, the sole noise in all of the silence, only slightly louder than his blood rushing in his ears, his heart thumping relentlessly in his chest, "I mean, I—I like Shiro. A lot. He's… he's an amazing person. I don't know how you can't see that, but—but maybe you do, I don't know. Maybe I just don't know enough about all of this, but… I want to. You're—you're beautiful, and scary. And I think about you all the time. Both of you, you've... You've taken over my life. I think about you at work, when I'm home, and... "

He turns his eyes to the sheets, to Shiro, to his hand now resting on top of Keith's—cold and smooth, like ice shaved in the shape of

human fingers.

“If you’ll let me in, I… I think I can help you. And I want to. I want to be a part of this. I want to… be with you guys.”

He knows how it sounds. He doesn’t dare look back to Keith’s face. Keith doesn’t shudder and he doesn’t pull away. Lance is surprised, abruptly, by the feeling of those frigid fingers turning palm up, lacing between his and holding him there.

Finally, his eyes flick back up to meet Keith’s.

But out of the corner of them, just as Keith’s eyes threaten to capture his entire attention once again—to possess him so completely that he might drown in the sparkling depths of them for all of eternity—he catches sight of the sun rising through the trees in the distance. The sky is dashed with splotches of orange and pink. The clouds are dark, and still, illuminated golden from behind as the sun casts its light over the white-capped cars in the parking lot, the distant buildings, and the rusted, gnarled bodies of their decrepit park smothered under ice and snow.

Lance is filled with dread. His mouth hangs open. He’s too terrified to say a single thing.

Keith turns slowly, releasing his hand. He, too, seems at a loss for words, as the two of them take in the slow rise of the sun. Lance has never considered daybreak to be a predator, but he feels now as though it’s just waiting to engulf Keith, to wrench him away just as the two of them are finally starting to understand each other. He knows that he doesn’t have a reason to believe that Keith can’t exist in the day aside from his suspicions that he might be something similar to a vampire, but Keith pushes himself up from the bed abruptly. He dithers for a moment, swaying in place, as though he’s torn between leaping through the window or just staying in here, at a loss for what to do with himself now that he’s faced with such a time-restricted predicament.

He turns back to Lance. He’s healthier now, more filled out, with more color to his skin. He seems even taller, less hunched over himself. The dark circles that once stained the skin beneath his eyes have faded to a healthy, peach-tinted white.

But he seems small, and lost, and scared. Lance is possessed entirely

by the need to do anything that he can to help him.

So he sucks in a long breath. He rubs his hands together before shoving them down on the bed to ease himself up.

His eyes dart around his room, hurriedly concocting some kind of game plan.

“Well,” he says, forced cheerfulness. Forced casualness. Forced blitheness that he prays that Keith won’t pick up on, if only so he won’t sense Lance’s fast-rising panic. “Shiro’s already spending the night, so… do you think you’d be okay in the closet? It’s pretty big. I think I could move some boxes around, stick a blanket in there, maybe grab some pillows—”

“It’s fine,” Keith isn’t blushing—never does—but Lance can sense that he’s embarrassed. He’s more fidgety right now than usual. He looks to Shiro as though he might wake up and give him some advice, as though he might offer comfort or an opinion that will make Keith feel more confident about all of this. But Shiro is quiet, still sleeping. Keith shakes his head, turning his focus to Lance’s closed closet door, “As long as light can’t get in, it’ll work.”

Lance pauses for a brief moment. Then, quickly, he nods, rubbing his hands together once again to ease some of his jittery anxiety before stumbling over to the closet and yanking open the door.

There isn’t a lot in there, save for some clothes that have fallen from the hooks onto the floor, and a small box of mementos shoved far enough back in the corner that he knows that Keith will have enough room to spread out without the need to move it. At the top of the closet, he’s stored a few blankets that he uses on especially cold nights when the heat in their apartment has sputtered out in its old age. When it’s so freezing that he’s felt as though he might wake up with icicles hanging from his nose and mouth.

So he pulls those down, makes some semblance of a cot for Keith at the bottom. And when he turns around to tell Keith that it’s ready for him, it takes every ounce of his self control not to scream and jump up, to make a grand show of his sudden terror when Keith is lingering so closely behind him that he should have heard him move, or breathe, or should have sensed his presence in some shape or form.

Keith doesn’t flinch away when Lance flails in place, and he definitely

doesn't apologize. He barely reacts at all, aside from the subtle pull of his eyebrows together, the pursing of his lips. He seems almost offended that Lance is still startled by him, and Lance resists the urge to say anything about it.

There will be time later to argue about how creepy Keith still manages to be, he thinks. They'll have tomorrow night, when Shiro wakes up and Keith climbs out of the closet. They'll surely have the following weeks and months to talk about everything that Lance has learned about the two of them, and everything that he's said within the last night.

He sighs, running a still-shaking hand through his hair.

"Is this okay?" He asks, breathless and just a little bit too harsh, even to his own ears.

Keith doesn't respond to him in words, but he does move forward. He draws a hand over the blankets in the bottom of the closet, leans to the side to inspect the gap under the door, the empty sliver where the wood meets the threshold, all of the cracks that could potentially spill light into this haven when he's too helpless and confined to run away.

"I can cover those once you're inside," Lance tells him.

And Keith nods, wordlessly stepping further forward, crouching down to avoid the clothing hanging above where he'll lay.

Before Lance can close the door behind him, before he can get to work taping up newspaper or magazines, or tacking sheets to the edges of the door to block out the light, Keith reaches forward, grasping him by the shoulder and pulling him down towards him.

He can see the twitch of Keith's throat when he swallows, can see the pop of his jaw when he clenches it. Keith's eyes are dark and stormy, and in the dull light of the morning sun peeking orange and pink through the window, Lance can see flecks of many shades of blue and purple resting in the deep shadows within them.

"Thank you," Keith tells him, voice low and gruff, his gaze suddenly flicked away as though he's embarrassed by all of this, belatedly, "For… for everything. Shiro, and… and this. And for keeping our secret. I don't get why, but… you've helped us a lot."

He leans in, pressing smooth, warm lips against Lance's cheek. There's no breath that fans hot over his skin. There's no vibration of life humming in the space between them. Lance feels as though he's floating just inches above the floor. He feels as though the morning is the rebirth of his old life in new, vivid color. Keith pulls away and scoots as far back as he can into the closet, and Lance resists the urge to go in after him.

He clears his throat, pressing a hand over his swiftly-pounding heart. Keith has curled up on his makeshift cot now, he's closing his eyes. The sun is growing brighter and warmer, more dangerous outside.

Lance closes the door. And after a moment spent catching his breath, he sets out about his room to collect the supplies necessary to cover the gaps in the door. He settles on electrical tape that he finds buried deep within the bottom of his bedside drawer. He figures that it'll come off clean later in the night, and it hopefully won't leave behind any marks or residue or torn paint that will tip off his sister when she comes in here to talk to him.

And once he's done, once the closet is adequately covered, he turns to check on Shiro once again. He doesn't know how he's going to explain to him exactly how they ended up here. He isn't sure how to tell him that Keith is sleeping here, too, that he's going to be an unwitting guest to their Christmas festivities, that everything, from now on, is going to be different—just because Lance himself couldn't resist the urge to stick his fingers so deep into their business that he's accidentally changed everything overnight.

For now, Shiro is quiet, sleeping, still. He looks healthier in the morning light. He seems normal here—not too big. Not scary. Not mysterious or strange or out of place. He looks like something that Lance could get used to seeing here, in his space. This feels like the beginning of a change in Lance's life that, surely, will only make things better.

However, he's already running late. He should have put the Christmas presents under the tree hours ago. He should have finished before the sun even started to rise. The kids could be up any minute now, and he's going to have to be especially quiet if he wants to sneak past their rooms without disturbing them.

His sister already won't forgive him for bringing a stranger here to disrupt the one family tradition that they've managed to build for

themselves in the wake of their parents' deaths. She won't understand how important it was, how desperately Shiro needed his help when surely, by the time that she climbs out of bed, he's going to look somehow even more healthy than he ever did in the night.

And she definitely isn't going to let him live it down if he ruins Santa too.

So he sets the electrical tape down on the nightstand. He takes a final, long look at Shiro, before his eyes trail over to the closet. Shiro is beautiful and golden in the morning. He's peaceful and serene in a way that makes Lance want nothing more than to curl up beside him. And Keith, hiding just beyond the door, is a gorgeous, mysterious thing. He's addictive and interesting, he's a mistake that Lance wants to make over and over again until he's dead.

These men have crashed into his life now, and they've changed the game completely. From now on, he knows that nothing will ever be the same. He's in too deep now. He's too invested.

But he still doesn't understand anything.

He doesn't know if Keith was born into this. He doesn't know what kind of creature Shiro might be.

He doesn't know why he cares about either of them so much. Why it feels suddenly so important that he help them, that he join them, that he throws away his last nineteen years of life in pursuit of the situation that has clearly drained both of them dry.

But he doesn't have time to think about any of that right now.

Later on, maybe, they'll have time to relay all of the information that they know to him. Someday, hopefully, he'll understand their plight well enough that he won't feel as though he's ambling about in a blind dark.

He'll figure out the right thing to tell his sister. He'll learn a way to explain all of this to the kids in terms that their young minds will understand.

But first, he needs to set out the Christmas presents, and pretend, for the time being, that nothing weird is going on here at all.

Chapter 10

Lance drags the back of his hand over the dotted sweat on his forehead, sighing deeply as he glances around his living room in one final attempt to make sure that everything is perfectly in place before he pushes himself up from his knees. They did a good job this year. His sister and himself were able to save up enough money since January, foregoing random snacks, fast food, anything that wasn't completely necessary for both of them, in order to afford nice gifts for his niece and nephews. It was hard, starting out. It had always been tempting to treat himself some nights to an extra slushie at the convenience store, or a candy bar to help energize him when he was feeling especially tired. But he'd resisted the urge more times than he didn't, and now, looking around at the numerous brightly wrapped packages littering the floor under the twinkling Christmas tree, he's proud of himself.

They'd managed to buy almost everything on the kids' lists with the money that they saved. It's humble, still, and maybe not as much as they deserve considering how good they've always been, but Lance knows that they'll be happy. His niece, getting to the age where she's too smart for her own good, has been asking him a lot of questions about Santa lately. He doesn't want to spoil anything for her, but he knows that this year might be the last one that she'll actually believe in the stories. He hopes that she'll be happy with what she got. And he hopes that, somehow, this might make up for the fact that things will quickly start to change, once the morning comes and Lance finally gains the courage to drag Shiro out of his bedroom and explain to his sister what he's doing there. He still hasn't come up with a lie that's ironclad enough to mask the truth. He still isn't completely sure what he'll tell her when the time comes.

He's suddenly aware of the fact that he isn't completely alone. It's getting lighter outside now, and the lights of the tree only amplify the brightness of the morning sun as it filters through the cracks of the curtains into the living room. He turns, slowly, tiredly, to meet the smiling, sleepy face of his sister. She's holding a glass of water close to her chest. Her glasses sit askew on the tip of her nose.

"I could have done that," she says, rubbing tiredly at the skin just below her eye, "You could have slept in for once."

Lance clears his throat, forcing a smile. He leans back on his knees,

easing himself slowly into a seated position as his sleep-muddied thoughts swirl around the concept of admitting anything about last night to her. With his legs crossed, he reaches his hands out behind him, palms flat on the floor to steady himself.

“I didn’t sleep last night anyway.” He figures that he might as well start being honest now. Maybe it’ll make things less miserable later on. “There was… kind of an accident, I guess? I, uh… I met up with the neighbor again and… well, he was bleeding. Something happened to him.”

Her expression suddenly drops. For a moment, she’d been smiling at him as though she knew something that he didn’t. It seems to Lance that he wasn’t nearly as sneaky last night as he thought that he was, but at least, now, she won’t have the ammo necessary to give him a hard time. At least, since he’s added a layer of seriousness to all of this, maybe she’ll feel too guilty to tease him about the supposed “adult time” that he knows that she must have thought he’d brought Shiro over for last night instead.

He understands, deep down, that she’d never actually get angry with him for trying to have a romantic life. He knows that bringing strangers into their apartment could be dangerous, but she foolishly trusts his judgment.

The only thing that he’s ever realistically needed to worry about was her teasing. But now, once he’s even just barely explained the situation, she doesn’t even seem capable of doing that.

“I thought I heard you bringing someone in here,” she says distantly, craning her neck and turning her body partially as though to get a better look at his closed bedroom door, “Is he okay? Is he still here?”

When she turns back to him, Lance offers her only a small nod. He cups his hand loosely over to his mouth, stifling a yawn before leaning forward and trying to work out the kinks in his back. It’s been a bad night for his muscles, he finds, and it only adds another layer of misery to the sleeplessness that’s slowly beginning to catch up to him.

“You haven’t slept yet, have you?” She asks then, avoiding all of the questions that he’d feared that she’d ask. He makes a mental note to thank her somehow later. Despite how much he’d dreaded her finding out about this, she’s always been the most comforting, most supportive person in his corner. It’s easy to forget when he’s sneaking around. It’s easy to delude himself into believing that she’s anything

but his beloved sibling, always trying so hard to push him gently in the right direction. “Do you wanna use my bed? I’m just gonna take a shower, maybe make breakfast… so my room’s free.”

He contemplates that for a moment, considers if he’ll even be able to sleep after all of the excitement last night, and all of the good things that will surely happen today. He has a feeling that he’s tired enough, at least, for a nap. He already feels as though he might be able to pass out instantaneously if he can find a flat surface to spread out on.

He rubs both hands over his face, letting out a long, low groan.

“Yeah, yeah, I think that would be nice, thanks,” he says then, mostly breath and half-yawned, “Can you wake me up when the kids are about to open their presents? Or like, you know… if Shiro gets up and wants to know what’s going on?”

He doesn’t look at her, but he can hear her hum of affirmation.

“So that’s his name, huh, Shiro?”

Lance realizes, with sudden terror, that he just gave her the wrong name.

Shiro had told him some time ago that if anyone asked, he should refer to him as “Ryou”. Lance had been surprised at the time, considering how tight-lipped Shiro generally was about his past, his many secrets, and the mysteries that he kept so firmly just outside of Lance’s grasp, that he’d been so honest about using an alias. He’d wondered why Shiro had even bothered to introduce himself to Lance with his real name in the first place. He’d promised back in, hopeful that perhaps doing this one thing right would open the doors to more honest communication in the future. And he realizes that maybe Shiro was right not to trust him right away. His first task, to use that fake name, he’s failed it immediately. He’s let Shiro down before he even had a chance to prove himself. He feels panic rising in his chest, feels as though he’s already ruined things irreparably just hours after managing to convince Keith, at least, to trust him. But he hurriedly assures himself that he can climb out of the deep trench that he just buried himself in.

He rattles off a tired laugh, reaching over to grab the edge of the coffee table before he pushes himself up.

“Did I say *Shiro* ? Man, I’m really tired! I’m not thinking straight! Shiro’s this guy who comes into the convenience store all the time… I

meant Ryou—Ryou's… the guy in the bedroom. Our neighbor."

She raises a brow, cocking one hip to the side. She doesn't seem as though she's completely convinced, but she must realize that there's no good reason why he'd lie about something like that. So she drops it. And he's thankful that, perhaps, if he can remember to continue this lie, maybe she'll forget that this weird moment ever happened.

He pushes himself up from the floor, wobbling on his feet for a short moment before steadying himself and lurching forward through the room. He'd eaten one of the cookies that the kids left out on the coffee table. He'd eaten one and left another half-eaten, left teeth marks in the edges of it as Santa always did in the movies, as though he'd been in such a big hurry that he couldn't possibly finish all of them. As though this feast of three cookies and a glass of warm milk had been so plentiful that he'd been too stuffed to eat it all. He'd sneaked a few of the extras from the Tupperware in the kitchen cabinet onto one of the plates from the dish strainer: the gingerbread man with the wonky icing smile, a Christmas tree that his nephew had inexplicably colored in purple, and a round one with a little notch at the top, which he imagines must have been an ornament, but his niece took the liberty of decorating with an eclectic swirl of colored icing that all baked together in a mess of sugary brown. He'd slipped the plate onto the nightstand in his bedroom before he'd started putting out the gifts. He'd thought, hopefully, that if Shiro could actually eat human food, maybe the calories and the sugar rush would be good for him after losing so much blood last night.

And under the plate on the coffee table, he'd remembered to put his sister's note as well. She's always been good at loopy cursive. Her kids, and himself when he was still young enough to believe in all of this, have always loved reading Santa's 'thank you' note just before opening the first of their gifts.

He chalks this morning up to another small success. Amazingly, he managed to do everything that was asked of him, half asleep and riddled with residual nerves, dotted with Shiro's dried blood, with the feeling of Keith's lips still buzzing against his cheek. His sister can't possibly understand why he's so proud of himself, or how many mental battles he waged this morning in order to stay focused until everything was put perfectly in place.

He brushes off his clothing, thankful that he remembered to take off his coat in the bedroom, but realizing, with a pang of regret, that Shiro's coat is still on the bathroom floor and the bloody bandages are

still at the top of the trash can.

Ah well, he thinks. It coincides with the story that he made up anyway. Even if Shiro looks better when he wakes up, his sister won't be able to deny that the mess they'd left behind looks convincing. Hopefully, she won't find herself curious enough about it to pry later on.

He takes a few slow steps forward, pausing only to rest a gentle hand on his sister's shoulder. She reaches out to ghost her fingers over his wrist, still holding the glass of water to her chest with the other hand, still sleepy and squinting with her hair standing in all directions and glasses uselessly askew on the tip of her nose.

He allows himself to smile. Today, everything has worked out. Today is going to be a good day.

"Merry Christmas, Veronica," he says to her then, allowing his features to soften, to tell of the tenderness that he feels for her, buried beneath so many layers of exhaustion and stress that, at first, he has trouble reaching it, "The kids are going to be really happy. We did a good job this year."

And she nods before he lets her go. She doesn't respond, but her gaze is distant, trained on the Christmas tree lights. She seems to be sitting on the words that she wants to tell him, but she lets him go. She allows this moment to fade, to ebb away, as Lance slips past her into her bedroom, just across the hall from where Shiro still sleeps.

"Stay still—losing a lot of blood—drink—I just fed—you need to drink—"

Shiro is standing on the edge of a vast cliff, peering down into the deep gully of a shadowed valley below. Fog rolls out over the ground beneath his feet, pouring in waterfalls down the edge of the cliffside, filling the basin of the ground far, far down like milk dripping gradually over the rim of a wide-mouthed glass. The sky above is a stormy gray: smooth and devoid of clouds, or sun, or stars. Everything feels monochrome here. Everything is quiet. His breath drags in and out of his lungs in a gradual whisper. He feels blank here. He feels erased.

But a voice in his ear murmurs comforting words. He feels suddenly at peace.

This dream space, this endless gray, he allows himself to float in these lapping waves of numbness, calmness, of finding himself to be nothing at all. He doesn't feel fear or regret or sadness. He can barely remember his own name, or the faces of dead men, slaughtered animals, how vivid and bright and all-consuming the scarlet of blood might be saturated in all of this grayscale.

He's aware of the fact that he's dreaming. It's been a long time since he's allowed himself to do so. It feels nice to take a break now. It feels nice to be weak, on low alert. To find himself warm and wrapped in soft blankets. The feeling of hard tile unyielding against his bones doesn't keep a foot planted firmly in half-awakeness tonight.

He watches the fog and he tips back his head to admire the flat gray sky. The gentle wind rustling through his clothing and his hair isn't substantially cold or particularly warm. No sensation is vibrant enough to claim his full attention. No sights or sounds are alarming enough to take center stage in this desolate scene.

He floats here, for a long while. He allows himself to become one with the waves of fog, with the milk in the basin of the mountain. He's sky and air, he's condensation dotting the frozen stone. He blinks, he breathes, and in the flash of a moment too soon, he finds himself instead standing in the center of a deserted city street. There are red lights blinking overhead, streetlamps at a standstill. To his right, over the small distance of the road, he can see the pedestrian sign looming white and haunting in the distance, like a reaper reaching out to him, to drag him from this dream to an afterlife that he isn't sure if he'll ever meet.

He knows where he is. And he knows, with a short, clipped inhale, exactly who he'll find momentarily crawling through the darkness here.

It was winter, 1981. He remembers venturing home from a New Year's Eve party at work. The new year wouldn't be for another few days, but they'd celebrated at the hospital when they could afford to. It had been a slow night—more victims coming in, Dead on Arrival. More mysteriously blood-drained people, barely heaving a final sigh before slipping on to perpetual sleep.

Shiro had grown accustomed to police officers and FBI roaming about

the ill-lit halls of his workplace. He'd finished his winter semester just a few weeks prior, and he'd kicked off his celebrations with a four-hour long interview with the police. He hadn't had the slightest idea why he'd been suspected by them, but maybe he fit the profile. Maybe he was more suspicious back then, than he could ever hope to understand. He was a loner, before all else. He was charismatic when he needed to be but altogether confined to his own private, lonely existence. A co-worker must have mentioned in their own interview that no one knew anything about Takashi Shirogane. They might not have understood that his reasons for privacy were far more innocuous than spending his free time draining vagrants and late-night workers of their blood. He understood even back then that the police would have loved nothing more than to search his dingy apartment for any traces of evidence that they could find, and he'd almost let them, almost asked if they'd want to rove his counters for suspicious fingerprints or his bathroom sink for traces of blood.

But he'd wondered if a guilty man would be just as cocky. He'd spent a lot of evenings watching Dateline and documentaries about serial killers. Sometimes he spooked himself so terribly that he couldn't sleep until the sun skimmed the silhouettes of the buildings in the early morning. Sometimes he'd given up altogether and calmed his nerves with a cigarette and a cup of coffee on his balcony. But he'd learned a lot of things about murderers from watching those shows. He'd learned about their God complexes, and their desire to outsmart the cops. Some of them would admit that they'd allowed the police to get close enough to catch them, just to see if they could get away with it. He'd warred with those two very reasonable reactions—would an innocent man be more likely to prove that he had nothing to hide, or would he be so adamant about his own innocence that he wouldn't feel the need to share too much?

He'd been painfully aware of his own speech patterns and movements as he'd talked to them. And only after the agonizing, endless barrage questioning was over did he realize that everyone in his wing had been questioned too.

He knew that he had things to hide, even if they weren't the clues that the police were looking for. His mortification at the mere idea of a few unwitting officers pawing through his small collection of gay pornography, his ticket stubs from men's clubs, and the fleeting clues as to why he'd actually hesitated before sharing himself with other people, it had halted every urge that he'd had to invite the investigators into his home. He knew that it wouldn't ruin his career if people found out about him, but it might make his peers look at him

differently. It might carry then, the stigma that he'd run so far away from home to escape all the way to this new town, this new job. And he wasn't sure if proving himself innocent that much sooner was worth finding another city to occupy. He didn't know how many times he could root himself in a new home before something new and terrible followed him, and he was forced to flee to somewhere safer.

It was selfish, in a way. He was wasting their time by not being more forthcoming. They could have been tailing the real killer, had they not taken a special interest in him, but he'd decided, in the end, that it wasn't his problem. It wasn't his fault that they'd wrongly honed in on him. It wasn't his responsibility to steer them in another direction at the cost of his own comfort and safety in this town.

His coworker had been abducted the night before. She'd been found drained of blood in a dark alley just a few blocks away. He'd felt like a fool for feeling demonized over a crime that he had no hand in, guilty for worrying about his own skin when a person who'd loaned him cigarettes and spare change for the vending machines had been slain in cold blood just hours before he'd awoken to start his day.

He'd been plagued with nightmares for weeks before then. He'd wondered if it was some cosmic awakening, like the psychic detectives on television. Like the people in the drama shows that he'd watched alone during his evenings off, who'd developed a sixth sense about the world around them among the wreckage of a tragedy that they so desperately wanted to prevent.

He didn't know back then that he was being hunted. He didn't realize that the predator waiting for him in the shadows just wanted so desperately to understand him, to get closer, to make a friend or a lover, so it, too, wouldn't be so alone in the world anymore.

He'd seen that scrawny, emaciated boy only three times in the flesh since the first time at that party, since their strange encounter in the alley behind his work. He'd offered him food only the second time, and assistance the third and forth. He'd thought that he was nothing but an innocent homeless teen, run out of his home for perhaps many of the same reasons that Shiro could never return to his either, and he'd felt compelled to help him, to get him off of the streets before his short, miserable life ended in the bloodshed that plagued their community.

And that night, stumbling down the street in a buzzed contentment, numb to the cold and the dark, and the eerie chill of a city finally

fallen asleep when it was usually so bustling with life, Shiro had found himself thinking of that boy then, too.

He can see himself in this grainy reenactment, hobbling down the sidewalk. The red stop light blinks, shudders. The casing around the glass has been cracked, as though someone managed to climb up the pole and attempted to destroy it. His fuzzy memories remind him that someone *did* break it, for a short time. He remembers the traffic jams caused by the road men scuttling upwards on their cherry picker, fumbling with the heavy steel encasing as they struggled to mend the damage to the light without wasting their time dismantling the whole thing. It had made the newspapers when it happened, if only because of how perplexing the whole thing was. They'd interviewed experts who had voiced their opinions, that it was nearly impossible for a human or an animal to damage the bulb without taking down the foundation first. And witnesses at the time had sworn that they'd simply heard the pop of the electricity shorting out, the crash of broken glass. That through the darkness and the sparking, smoking aftermath of some creature pulverizing the streetlight, they'd seen nothing suspicious when they'd peered out of their windows, or turned their heads on the streets. It was as though the light itself had spontaneously combusted. It was as though darkness itself was slowly engulfing the town. And it would be a very long time before Shiro realized that there was nothing particularly menacing about the lights breaking. That it wasn't an omen or a warning, but a timid creature that didn't like the glare of them in the dark. A silly, grumpy boy who felt that the night should be black and not lit up as though it were daytime, who, no matter how often he would someday chastise him for breaking public property, couldn't stop himself from acting on his distinct distaste of humans "playing God with daylight", as he'd so crudely coined it.

But that night, Shiro hadn't thought much of the broken glass or the disappearances, or the silence of the abandoned roads around him. The pedestrian sign had blinked on and off. Steady successions. That night was molasses. It was a gradual drag of moments fed in a loop, existence itself slowed and stalled as he'd fumbled in half-awareness through a grainy dark.

He'd dithered at the other end of the crosswalk for a moment too long. He'd looked both ways, to his credit, before ambling across the street.

The crash is the only thing that he can hear in the dream now. The crack of bone is deafening, the squelch of muscle and skin and blood pulverized under heaving metal. The world around him is blurry and

too loud. He can feel his pulse pounding just under his skin, his cold fingers numb, his eyes blinded—and pain. Pain is everywhere. It's everything that he is in this moment. Confusion, and fear, the regret, and the hurt.

Shiro knows on a technical level that he was pinned to the pole that housed the crosswalk box. By a truck that had slipped on the ice and barreled towards him. He knows that the driver was drunk, that they were killed on impact. The police, later on, wouldn't understand how Shiro seemingly clawed himself from his sandwiched position between the car and the pole, how he escaped after losing so much blood. And how that driver could have been drained completely dry without any open wounds but a clean, dark bruise where his skull had been crushed against the steering wheel, without any traces of blood on the seats or the floorboards or the snowy ground outside of his open car door, where they'd found his body crumpled and lifeless and empty.

But Shiro had shivered there in the cold night, alone. He'd thought that he would die in the same way that he'd lived—just far enough away from other people that no one would see him, that no one would notice his breathless, whispered pleas for help until it was too late. He'd tried to scream, to yell, to call for someone to see him. He'd grappled with a voice lodged down in his throat, with the blood dribbling down a long gash across his face and pooling in the crack of his lips. He didn't know if he'd choke to death and suffocate on the blood in his throat, or if he'd bleed out first. He'd never felt the fear of being pinned, of finding himself as nothing but an animal caught in a trap. He'd never tasted death as vividly as he had in that moment, as his heart pounded faster and faster, and his adrenaline blurred the dark shapes in the night around him.

With an arm pinned tight beneath the hot grill of the car, and another weak and boneless as he struggled to push against the hood, he felt remarkably helpless. He could move his legs just enough to tap them against the steel, but he didn't have the inhuman strength required to shove the car away. He could imagine how he'd stretch out if someone were to remove it. Like the mozzarella inside of a cheese stick, he'd thought. His guts and blood would tangle in the grill and twine out between both of them. He'd watch in muted terror as his insides spilled out from the deep cavity of his abdomen, sizzling with warmth against the snow before his vision faded to an endless black. He knew that even if the paramedics could reach him in time, there was little hope of surviving long enough to ever walk again. He'd realized at that moment that he was going to die. There was no escaping this. There was no tomorrow.

There was just a shadow moving slowly just beyond his peripherals, that he'd thought, in that moment, must have been death.

The person-shaped blur had stopped first to pull open the door of the car. The dead man inside had fallen out onto the snowy ground, illuminated in his stillness by the flickering red stoplight above them. And the figure hadn't checked his pulse. It hadn't asked if either of them were okay. It had knelt over the dead man, as though it was kissing him. As though that was the mark of death, and it would come for Shiro next.

But Shiro knows now, even in this dream, that death wouldn't welcome him that night, or any night, ever again. The darkened figure had drunk of the man's blood, giving itself the energy to rise slowly, to pad over to Shiro with a growing sense of urgency that he didn't understand.

To him back then, it seemed to have been taking its time. But he knows now that Keith had expended a vast amount of energy that night to bring him back, to heal him. Keith had given him something special, something sacred, something that he hadn't understood any more than Shiro had, but he'd felt, in whatever feral instincts slept in his dead veins, needed to be done to save the first person who he'd ever met who had extended a hand to him in kindness.

The creature—a twitchy black distorted shadow that felt unnatural to watch for too long—had drawn nearer. Shiro himself was pinned in a way that pressed his feet into the ground at an odd angle. He thought that maybe his ankles were broken, that perhaps every part of him would fall apart the moment that the fire department arrived and attempted to peel the car from around the pole where it embraced him. Through the smoke and the dizziness and the feeling of seeing something that he wasn't meant to see, Shiro found himself eventually looking into eyes so dark and endlessly black that he felt as though he might have been face-to-face with a devil. Those caverns of deep darkness were maybe the path that he'd find himself walking towards purgatory, or Heaven, or Hell. And soon enough he'd sputter out, bled dry and crumpled pathetically in a quiet and lonely night. The sole survivor of a terrible car accident for an entire fifteen minutes before he ebbed away into obscurity.

He didn't know who would attend his funeral. He didn't know where he'd be buried. He didn't have friends, or a family, or a lover anymore. And he felt himself dying just as he'd lived—by himself. Cold and lonely, and wishing desperately that something would

happen just to shake up the monotony around him.

He wasn't afraid of the creature as it watched him. He didn't feel fear trembling through him, as he noted the smooth, porelessness of its pale skin. It was like a doll, and a part of him recognized it. A part of him realized that this creature had been tailing him for months by then, that it had finally closed in, caught him when he was vulnerable, and there was nothing that he could do then to stop it.

He didn't feel regret or fear. He didn't feel the need to scream, or fight, or to try to shield himself somehow. The monster would watch him die, and maybe it would kill him before he did so naturally. But he wouldn't be alone. It was laughably pathetic, but he felt comforted then, knowing that in his final moments, he wouldn't be expected to pass on alone.

"Stay still," a voice told him, but it spoke not from a mouth, not from a single, concentrated direction, but felt instead like darkness lapping at him from every black corner. It felt all around him, in the same way that he might have felt himself in the center of insect song in the summer as a kid. That feeling of grand applause in the air, humming in the ground under his bare feet, and all around in the night—unseen and unquestioned. A cacophony of buzzing, chirping, singing like these soft words somehow perfectly heard when only spoken just an octave above a whisper. "You're losing a lot of blood. You need to stay still."

The shadow person, death, or as he'd learn to call him later on, Keith, had reached forward and drawn gentle fingers over his cheek. Even in the chill of late winter, his hands had felt icier. They'd felt so cold that Shiro had to stop himself from shivering, had to steel himself for another onset of sickness and a rolling ache of pain as he felt himself slowly dying away. He only half-recognized Keith from the fleeting moments that he'd caught sight of him before. He only barely comprehended that the boy standing in front of him now, still dressed in that oversized, filthy t-shirt with bare, dirty feet in the snow, was the same person with whom he'd tried to have a conversation, the boy who he wanted to help. The creature that haunted his dreams for nights and nights until the feeling of him crawling inside of Shiro's head was more of a familiar comfort than anything horrifying or disgusting or unknown.

Shiro had decided back then that perhaps he really was just that lonely. He was lonely enough to accept a copious amount of nightmares starring the same curious, terrifying character if only it felt

like something that he could rely on. But he'd never imagined that the same creature would leap out of those dreams and comfort him in his final moments now. He'd never thought that maybe he was chained to this monster, this boy, this dream so strongly that he'd rely on him with his dying breath to keep him company.

Shiro, as Keith lifted a wrist to his own face and sunk those long, sharpened canines so hard into the flesh there that Shiro could hear an audible crack, was only barely convinced that Keith was even real. He was a man of science, a medical professional in training. He'd seen and heard of many things that felt supernatural at face value, but could quickly be explained away by real, solid facts. He'd thought that maybe his subconscious had been bothered by the idea of a homeless boy, wearing so few clothes in the winter. He'd contemplated that perhaps his nightmares were a materialization of his own latent guilt. And even as he bled out, he wondered if he was just hallucinating. If perhaps his dying brain cells were piecing together an image that would allow him to make peace with his demise. This boy, who had haunted his thoughts for months by then, felt like the right person to beckon him to the afterlife. It felt as though things had come full circle, and Shiro, guiltily, allowed himself to believe in it, if only so he could give in and move on quietly.

Keith had offered his wrist, shoving it closer to Shiro's face as though prompting him, without words, to try biting it too. Shiro had lost a lot of blood, had felt lightheaded and fuzzy at the edges of his vision. He could barely speak to ask Keith what he wanted, why he would ask something so disgusting and outlandish of him when it was more than evident that he would very soon slip away.

Keith pressed the bloodied wrist closer to his lips, close enough that Shiro could feel the chill of it and tasted the copper just on the tip of his tongue.

"I just fed," Keith had told him, "So drink. I—I think… I think it will help you."

The uncertainty hadn't rung any warning bells for Shiro back then, but only because he wasn't in a fit state to worry about anything hurting him when he was so sure that he was going to die anyway. It hadn't felt as though it was that big of a risk to take—to humor some weird stranger who had happened upon the scene, to give himself some company in his final moments despite the fact that he could clearly make out a deep, dark stain of blood around Keith's mouth where he had, true to his word, fed from the dead driver.

Shiro hadn't been capable at the time of realizing that Keith had drank that driver's blood. He'd been motionless and silent even before Keith had shown himself, Shiro knew. He'd caught sight of him slumped like a ragdoll over the steering wheel, and he'd felt angry, felt cheated that the idiot couldn't even lay on the horn correctly if only to draw the attention of anyone close enough to hear it. That man would never know that he'd almost murdered someone in his recklessness. He'd never live long enough to understand that he'd jump-started the process of Shiro's immortality long before either Keith or Shiro were comfortable even admitting that they'd caught each other's interest. Shiro would have been home then, watching television and smoking a cigarette, if only he hadn't intervened. And he'd been so selfish, even in death. He hadn't granted Shiro a look of regret. He hadn't given him even the satisfaction of knowing that he'd be haunted by this for the rest of his life. He'd just died. He'd slipped away, and he'd left Shiro to suffer in the wreckage of his mistake all by himself.

Keith would tell him, many years from that moment, that he would have killed the guy even if he'd survived. That he'd fed from better people, and a drunkard whose negligible driving thinned the population surely wasn't a person who the humans would miss too much.

Shiro, someday, would give up trying to convince him that a human life was a human life, no matter how pointless it seemed to Keith. That it wasn't better or worse to murder one person in cold blood when you could just not murder people in the first place. His lingering humanity would plague him for decades. It would drive a wedge between them. It would distance Keith from him, with that perpetual hunger, with the understanding that Shiro didn't approve of even the more essential facet of his entire existence.

But Shiro, that moment many decades ago, had listened. It hadn't been easy to drink, but he'd pressed his lips into the wound on Keith's arm. He'd lapped at the blood, winced at the nasty, metallic flavor of it. Something didn't feel right, he'd known that too. The blood tasted different than his own. It mingled strangely in his palate. It took every ounce of his inner strength not to wretch and spit it back up. There was something duller about it, as though it had been filtered. As though it had been watered down and drained, concocted with something rotten and soured. It tasted as though it was expired, as though he was eating something long after it had gone bad. Shiro wouldn't realize for a long time that Keith only had circulation after he'd eaten. He only had blood to offer Shiro because that should have been his sustenance for the entire week. But he'd given it up to save

him. Shiro hadn't understood it back then any better than he understands it now. He doesn't know if Keith was just lonely or curious. He isn't sure what compelled him to seek him out instead of so many other people all that time ago.

But the blood in his mouth had tasted like starchy copper. And it tasted like alcohol, and it was dark and almost black. Keith watched him as he continued to drink, as his strength slowly, mysteriously returned to him, and the world around him had grown darker and blurrier until he'd faded, slowly, finally into the fuzzy reassurance of sleep.

He isn't surprised to find himself in Lance's bedroom when he wakes up. He experiences a peaceful buzzing of sleepiness into coherency as he comes to, interrupted only by the sound of someone moving around just outside of his field of vision. He doesn't move too quickly, doesn't do much more than flex the fingers of his hand and gauge the amount of pain that he feels in his still-bandaged wrist. It seems that the majority of his wound closed overnight, as he'd expected. His head doesn't feel lighter than it should, still barely awake. He doesn't feel sick or more tired than usual, and the only sensation that's surprising is the hunger that currently roils in his belly. And it growls, low and quiet. He tries to consider all of his options for today, even as whoever must be sharing this room with him continues messing with things, just out of sight. They don't seem to have noticed that he's awake yet, and he allows them to carry on as he breathes in and out. As his vision clears and the yellow-cast of the early morning becomes more vibrant against the cracked, water-damaged paint of Lance's bedroom walls. As he smiles at the colorful pattern of Lance's blankets—sharp ocean designs and tropical flowers. It's charmingly befitting. The whole room is warm and it smells like Lance. It wraps around him in an embarrassingly comforting way. And he feels, for this brief moment, totally content.

He isn't worried about the other person, or what they might be looking for, because he tells himself that it must be Lance. In his half-awakeness, he can't fathom why another person would be in this bedroom, especially without making a fuss about the fact that he's sleeping on Lance's bed. He can feel the dread nagging at his thoughts, the realization that the two of them will either have to sneak him out later or explain to his sister why he decided to stay the night, but he decides that he'll worry about that later. For now, he chooses to enjoy his morning and to finally thank Lance properly for sticking his neck out for him when, in reality, it's only going to inconvenience him to do so. It isn't until he finally decides to greet Lance and turns his head

just far enough to look at him, fumbling with what sounds like a book or a stack of papers on the nightstand, that he's met with the surprised, wide eyes of a woman who he's only seen in brief passing around the apartment complex until now.

Veronica, he remembers, Lance's sister. She may or may not have been one of the people to call and complain about the newspaper that Shiro had temporarily pasted over his windows to block out the sun, Lance has never been too sure. She's holding a notebook in her hands now, a page opened and fallen down to hang from the binding, scribbled over with thick letters in pen that Shiro can't make out from his current angle. For a moment, the two of them simply stare at each other. Shiro feels suddenly awkward and too big to be here, and he feels, curiously, his connection to Keith stronger than it should be, with the distance of the courtyard between them.

Something about sensing Keith, about feeling him as though he were close enough to lie next to, it surges a confidence through him that he doesn't normally feel, and after a few uneasy stretches of silence, he pushes himself up from the mattress, adjusting his position so that his feet touch the floor. It twinges just slightly in his wrist wound when he puts weight on it, but it definitely isn't the worst pain that he's ever felt. He ignores it, if only so he can offer Veronica a reassuring smile, something friendly and light and casual even as his tired brain is skittering through all of the possibilities of this moment.

He doesn't know if she's supposed to know that he's here. He isn't sure where Lance is. And he doesn't remember if Lance gave him an excuse to use, and what sort of lie is expected now to get him out of needing to explain anything.

Veronica closes the notebook, placing it gently back on the nightstand. She sucks in a short breath, tucking her hands into the pockets of her pajama pants and turning midway in the direction of the door, as though she's considering bolting through it without explanation.

"I'm sorry," she says finally, eyes trained on the door, brows pushed close together, "I heard you talking in here, and I wanted to make sure that things were okay. Lance told me that you got hurt last night, but… he's sleeping now, so—"

She turns back to him, her cheeks dusted with color. And she extends a hand—laughably, the correct one, that Shiro can shake easily, as opposed to Lance's small blunder when they first met.

“I’m Veronica, by the way. Lance’s sister.”

Shiro maneuvers a more friendly smile. He tries to remember exactly how normal people introduce themselves, how normal people might behave when meeting the family of friends.

“Ryou,” he tells her, “I’m so sorry for intruding, on Christmas of all days. If the kids aren’t awake yet, I’d be more than happy to get out of your hair before it’s too late.”

He shakes her hand in a short, stilted, jerky motion. She quickly shoves it back into her pocket once they part.

“The kids are always asking why uncle Lance doesn’t have a girlfriend yet,” she tells him, laughter in her words, “Seeing a guy like you leaving his room will probably answer most of their questions.”

Shiro’s face feels immediately warm at the insinuation, but he can’t find the will to deny it. He isn’t sure if Lance chose a fake relationship to explain this or not, and he definitely isn’t opposed to the idea of claiming such a thing. The idea of finding this routine to be a regular one is tempting, no matter how guilty it makes him feel. He can smell something delicious cooking in the kitchen, and it’s bright here, and warm, and people smile, and they laugh. And the children seem happy, they seem to love each other very much.

Shiro always thought, when he was human, that he’d like to have a family someday.

But now, with Keith in tow, he isn’t sure if that’s even a possibility. And he isn’t sure if he’d even be willing to sacrifice the situation that he’s in now in order to make that a reality.

So he draws in a breath, taking a moment to inspect the bandages wrapped around his wrist. He’ll have to apologize to Lance later for scaring him, and thank him for taking the time to clean him up and put him to bed—in his own bed, where he clearly wasn’t able to sleep himself, since Shiro took up the majority of it. And later tonight, when Keith wakes up, he’ll have to apologize to him as well. For pushing him too far. For making things worse between them. He knows that Keith must be terrified right now. He knows that Keith is more than likely only blaming himself. And he knows that all of this is his own fault, that he hurt someone and inconvenienced this entire happy family. That he’s surely ruined their Christmas and they’re only being polite when they reassure him that everything will be okay.

“Thank you for being so accommodating,” he says, pushing upward and steadying himself on legs that still feel a little uneven, “But I really should get going.”

Veronica falls back, resting both palms against the nightstand to prop herself up. She purses her lips, raising a brow and scrutinizing him for a long moment.

“To what, your empty apartment? I know that no one else lives with you. You don’t know anyone around here. Why don’t you stay for breakfast, at least? You look half-dead.”

He can’t help but offer a laugh—short and crisp and breathy. He draws his hand through his hair, his eyes wandering over to the closet door and lingering there for a lot longer than he feels like they need to. There’s a strange aura to this room that he hadn’t felt last night. The connection that he feels to Keith is so strong now that he can feel it thrumming like electricity through his veins.

He can’t deny that he’s hungry. He can’t pretend, even privately, that he isn’t lonely, and that the idea of spending another Christmas by himself is more depressing than he needs right now. The food baking in the kitchen smells delicious. He feels recharged here, more powerful. If he’s ever considered Keith to be the outlet that he plugs himself into, the power source that feeds him the will to live, the strength to wake up, the ability to stay young and virtually immortal as long as Keith exists—

He doesn’t know what that would make this apartment, suddenly. And he doesn’t understand it, but he knows that it will be good for his health—both mental and physical—if he allows himself to stay here for just a little bit longer. At least, he reasons with himself, until his wound completely heals.

So he sighs.

“You make a good point,” he says, manufactured to be lighthearted, playfully defeated, “But please don’t feel too inclined to let me join you. This is your family’s holiday. I don’t want to impede on that.”

Veronica waves a hand in the air.

“You won’t, I swear.” Her voice is laced with a sly happiness. “I haven’t seen Lance this excited since, well… ever. We didn’t buy each other Christmas presents this year, but I think having you here is pretty much everything that he wants anyway.”

It's enough to send a deep, healthy heat scattering across his skin. It's enough to make him spit a noise that's caught between a gasp and a shocked laugh.

But he resigns himself to this because if Veronica is right, it's the least he can do.

And he has to admit, it's the closest to his private, forbidden Christmas fantasies that he's probably ever going to come.

And maybe, later on, when he returns home and finally faces Keith, he can feel less guilty about this entire mess if his wounds have healed, and there's nothing left for Keith to agonize over anymore.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Detective Sanda runs her fingers over the glossy surface of the photographs spread across her desk. Across the room, under a flickering spotlight that breaks up the thick shadows in a tiny, windowless office, there are red tacks pressed into corkboard, holding up more pictures, and maps, and various snippings of newspaper articles from cases extending back years before she was even old enough to join the police force. These cases span from every corner of the country. They tie together with a thread so thin that she isn't even sure if they're truly related or if perhaps it's too late at night, too cold outside and in this dingy dark space of hers, and if maybe she's exhausted and distracted and the frayed edges of the string that she's used to map the course of this murderous, three-decade-long road trip just seems to make sense to her because of it.

The busted streetlamps, the stolen blood from banks at various hospitals. The mutilated animals found in bloody trash bags discovered sometimes strewn at street corners and deep in the bellies of the woods. The disappearances and the bodies that were never found. The dead ends, the hours and days poured into investigations that inevitably went cold. There's something missing from all of this. There are no witnesses, no clues. It could be an animal. Bears are common here, she knows. A bear could maim a deer and drag it somewhere before gutting it. A bear could kill a drunkard easily, with one fell swoop of its paw. But the missing humans rarely surface as corpses later on, and a bear couldn't scale a street lamp without splintering it. This case isn't as open and shut as her peers have tried to assure her. This isn't over, by a long shot, and based on the general trajectory of these cases, the history left coiled long and mysterious and unanswered behind this perp, they're going to move on again soon, to a new town in a new state, with a new unassuming police force that will barely have the time to catch wind of them before they disappear again. They might not kill in this new place, but the usual signs will spring up. And eventually, she's seen in the waves of casualties on her self-made charts, eventually, they'll get sloppy. They always slip eventually. And she isn't particularly eager to wait around until they do.

On her desk, she's opened the files of four men, and their descriptions

are too similar for this to be coincidental. They were each tall, handsome, well-liked men. They each did well at their very similar jobs. They were secretive but not completely asocial. They attended office parties and sometimes drinks after work, but none of their coworkers knew where they'd come from, or where they stayed in their respective towns.

And all of them disappeared eventually, without a trace. One day there, one day gone. Like smoke melted in the air. Like ghosts, whisked away so soon that many witnesses in the aftermath were left to wonder if they were ever even there at all.

In the interviews that Sanda has managed to collect from the database, most people say pretty much the same thing:

"He was nice, but he kept to himself. I don't know where he lived or what he did on his days off. He just came to work and went home. He never even talked about having a family or any friends. It was always just work with him. But he worried me, I felt sad for him. You could tell by looking at him that he'd been through a lot, but if you tried to reach out, he'd just smile and thank you… but the wall would come up. And there was no getting past it."

This list starts with Takashi Shirogane: born in 1956, in Lowell, Massachusetts. He was raised in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, heir to his father's Pharmaceutical company and a small fortune passed down from his mother's side of the family. He moved to New York City at the age of eighteen to attend medical school, and there are no reports of his parents filing a missing person report after he disappeared. No inquiries from them to the police. No search parties organized in his name. From what Sanda has collected, of all of the victims who disappeared during that time, Takashi Shirogane's family stood out as the only one to never hold a funeral in his memory.

It's been years since then, and she wonders why that might have been. She wonders if his late mother might have died hoping that someday he'd come home, or if perhaps they knew what their son was capable of, and they were eager to wipe their hands of him the moment that he strayed too far from the nest.

Takashi Shirogane was twenty-five years old at the time of his disappearance. He worked at a college-funded and student-staffed hospital at the corner of the street where one bad area became worse. His blood was found smeared over a lamp post where his body should have been pinned by the car that crashed into it. The metal had

wrapped around the pole, it should have held him there. There should have been even just a trace of evidence, aside from the blood, left behind.

But there was nothing but the drained body of the driver, the pulverized car. There was nothing but a stop light newly broken that had just been fixed days before. There were no footprints in the blood or in the snow. There were no traces of a third person arriving on the scene before the ambulance. Witnesses, those who heard the initial crash and called the police from their apartments, claimed that Shirogane had been there one moment, and when they looked away, though in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

That was the end of the first man's tale. The final mention of him was in an "In Memoriam" listing in the local newspaper months later, long after the case had long since dried up. Sanda can, and she has already, searched his late parents' names in the registry of the deceased. They're buried together in a twin plot, in an old graveyard among the rest of the Shirogane line. But there isn't a plot available for a missing son. There's no mention of the name "Takashi" in their obituaries or carved into their headstones. To a casual historian, perhaps, it might appear that they died childless.

Sanda doesn't know what to make of that particular aspect of the story. She doesn't know if she's allowed to feel sorry for a boy who might have died in anonymity. She isn't sure if somehow, Takashi Shirogane really did survive that crash. If something dragged him away, just under the noses of curious onlookers. If he lives on, somehow, and his parents might have known that he was a monster all along.

But she does know that this case doesn't end, for her, so easily.

A few months later, Haru Takahashi began working as a nurse's assistant in Newark, New Jersey, less than an hour away. He would disappear inevitably too, and there wouldn't be any mention of a man with a similar build popping up and vanishing inexplicably during short-lived crime sprees for a long time after that. The police had been suspicious of Takahashi at first, just as they'd been of Shirogane before he disappeared, but they hadn't been able to connect him to any of the crimes before he went away. And they hadn't been sure if he'd be able to overpower a victim given the state of his missing arm. Haru Takahashi's background had checked out flawlessly: shuffled around from group homes to various foster parents in Edison from childhood into adulthood, he'd attended a local high school and graduated from

a nearby community college. They'd called sources that had confirmed as much, but couldn't place a face to the name. Takahashi had been forgettable in Edison, but he'd left a dark mark branded on Newark for nearly a decade before that case, as had the others, eventually fizzled out.

There wasn't any suspicion back then that Shirogane and Takahashi could have been the same person, simply because it was such an outlandish idea that Shirogane could have survived losing such a large amount of blood. Takahashi's claim of being born without his right arm couldn't be contested, and, of course, without even a hint of evidence to stack against him, the police had been left as sitting ducks in his wake.

Perhaps the biggest issue that arose in the New York investigation was the fact that Shirogane's DNA and fingerprints were found nowhere near any of the bodies. It was true that he'd attended a party with one of the victims, but for many others, his alibi was ironclad. Sanda isn't sure if this suggests an accomplice or not. And she realizes, as she massages the tension from her temples, that Shirogane would be almost sixty years old by now. It's plausible, maybe, that he'd still have the strength to hurt people and disembowel local wildlife, and to leave behind his street light calling card in some way, but only if he had help. And only if that help managed to be someone much younger and stronger, but still easy enough to be manipulated. She knows that it's possible that Shirogane could have fostered a child, but she isn't sure why that doesn't feel right to her. For every fact that she learns about these men and this case, a thousand possibilities flanked by their own dozens of questions spring up in every feasible direction. Some are darker and some are more mysterious, but every single one of them, when it comes down to it, has its own set of holes and flaws that won't stand up perfectly under the scrutiny that she subjects each of them to.

As it stands, Sanda has no solid proof that these two men could be the same person aside from a gut feeling. She doesn't know if Shirogane survived his near-death, or even if he had anything to do with the attacks that resulted in so many casualties over thirty years ago. None of the officers who worked those cases are still employed, and many of them have long since passed away. She's tied up in red tape and aged files that aren't nearly specific enough to connect any of the dots exactly how she wants them to. For all she knows, Takashi Shirogane could have rotted to nothing decades ago, and the curious "Akihiro Ito" who had worked for a fleeting six months at a local emergency room a few years after the murders in Newark could have been a

completely different person.

From an objective distance, the idea that Takashi Shirogane could move between these towns virtually undetected seems outlandish at best. And it gets crazier even still, if she attests that, from there, he made his way to Atlanta, Georgia, then Birmingham, Alabama, and somehow found himself all the way across the country, here, in the most innocuous reaches of the mountains of Colorado, which, if her research is correct, is much smaller and unassuming than any of the other cities that he's ever preyed on before.

She wonders if he's simply stopping here for a short break. And she wonders where he might be hiding here now. No mysterious and murderous old men fitting what Sanda presumes would be the current description of Takashi Shirogane have recently begun working in the hospitals or medical wards nearby. The only new-hire for the last few months, a man named Ryou Yamazaki who does, in fact, vaguely resemble the description of Takashi Shirogane from three decades ago, is far too young to have even been alive before the murders started. The plates on his car, his social security number and driver's license, his references and college certificate, they're all tied intrinsically to Miami, Florida. She'd dug around briefly for any unsolved murder investigations in Miami, and when she'd found only a cold case roughly matching the description in Orlando, she'd wondered if she'd accidentally distracted herself from the important facets of this case with what was a tempting, but ultimately fruitless red herring.

When she'd considered that perhaps he might have been the key to all of this—a child or grandchild of Shirogane's, a young relative who he'd taken under his wing and seduced into this terrible life of secrecy and murder, she'd found only dead ends. Grown up in a boy's home that shut down in '98. His teachers and his peers that she'd managed to find on social media only had good things to say about him. Her partner had warned her then to let it go. Her bosses had instructed for her to continue pursuing their most recent missing person's case as though it was nothing more than an anticlimactic hit-and-run. They'd claimed that the missing body wasn't surprising near the woods, where any number of animals could have dragged that man away. They'd told her that nothing bad ever happens here, that she's getting paranoid after so much quiet serenity over so many peaceful years. They'd told her to stop thinking of the world as a violent and dangerous place, and while she'd yearned to believe them, to live in the idyllic bubble that they'd so blindly wrapped around themselves, this case, the strange occurrences, they'd manifested as an itch just under her skin that she was growing only more and more desperate to

scratch.

She's a small-town detective in a place where nothing ever happens. The last tragedy here that could even be compared to a murder was that unfortunate car wreck just before Christmas almost a decade ago. The vehicle had veered on black ice and barreled over the edge of a hill. It had been so pulverized upon the arrival of paramedics that they hadn't been sure where the leather seats of the minivan ended and the mangled flesh and pummelled bone began. She remembers seeing the myriad of wrapping paper and crushed toys scattered down the snowy hillside. The blood, scarlet against black and white, the gold-striped boxes, the action figures jeering out ugly and distorted versions of their catchphrases as she'd eased her way down. The town had been gutted and hollowed by that sole event. She remembers, all these years later, the multi-colored ribbons that townsfolk had wrapped around the broken barrier between the road and the hillside to pay their solemn respects.

Her partner calls her a conspirator for pulling up that file as well—for skimming the details of the McClain deaths as though they might have been discovered drained of blood in the ditch where their car flipped over. As though, perhaps, even back then this great evil had been sleeping, waiting, feasting on the misfortune of others until someone became clever enough to stop it.

It's a long shot, but she's taken the time to look into the deceased couples' son, Lance McClain, anyway. Despite her original trepidation and doubt, despite the fact that at first, even she'd thought that she was delving just a little bit too far down the rabbit hole of this mystery when she'd spent a few days tailing the kid, she'd been both surprised and almost stunned in disbelief when she'd caught him standing next to none other than Ryou Yamazaki himself: the suspicious could-be accomplice, could be grandchild or son of a prolific serial killer, after he'd wandered back to his complex from his janitorial night shift. She hadn't been clocked in for overtime hours. She'd done this on her own time. And she understands that the "proof" that she'd found of his involvement is shaky at best, definitely nothing that could ever hold up for a warrant or in court during a trial, but it's enough to make her suspicious. Enough to make her focus her attention on Lance, his family, and the apartment complex itself.

At the very least, she has a lead that the other officers in the past weren't afforded until long after Shirogane disappeared: she knows where he lives. She knows what he does when he's not at work, or, at

the very least, she has watchful eyes on the man who might very well be carrying on his legacy. She knows that Ryou Yamazaki is the best lead that she has, and she has a feeling that if she continues to dig deeper, everything else will eventually fall neatly into place.

She's found, over the weeks, that Lance McClain spends a strangely lengthy amount of time waiting alone in the dark at the derelict, defunct park just off of the parking lot of the complex. And sometimes, he moves about as though he's speaking to someone, even when he's clearly not on the phone. Even when there's no one there at all. Sometimes he joins Ryou as Ryou smokes a cigarette, and sometimes he waits out in the frigid cold well into the early morning, all alone.

She wonders about him. He seems normal in every other sense of the word. He works his two jobs, he walks a gaggle of children to the school bus every morning and sees them off as they leave for school. Sometimes he lingers outside on his balcony with a woman who Sanda has learned is his sister, watching her smoke with the same absent expression that he often watches Ryou, but with more distant eyes. Always trained on the apartment that her sleuthing has taught her belongs to Ryou Yamazaki. Always seeming as though he's waiting for something, as he often waits at night. As though he's on guard for a sign or a cue, to be brought into action for something that Sanda still isn't sure of. Lance McClain seems to spend many hours of the day like a ghost. He comes alive only in the dark, when he's speaking animatedly to a person who's invisible to everyone but himself. No one around him seems to notice that he's acting strangely. No one seems to care that he sneaks off in the dark in a town that's gradually becoming very dangerous to even live in. No one seems to have any inkling that something might be very, very wrong.

But Sanda sees him. Sanda, out of every other person so determined to live in blissful unawareness, she knows that something isn't right with Lance McClain. She knows that Ryou Yamazaki did something to him, that he made him this way. That at the center of all of this, there's only the two of them.

It's just a matter of figuring out what exactly is going on.

She isn't sure why her instincts are drawing her to this boy. He's never gotten in trouble for so much as a curfew violation. He's never been busted at a house party or for trying to use a fake ID. In every obvious way, he keeps his nose clean. He's a law-abiding citizen with a sparkling record, but something about him doesn't sit right in her

stomach. Something about him makes her skin crawl.

She decides tonight that she'll keep digging. Surely, tonight, Lance McClain will spend the holidays with his family. Surely, tonight, he'll abstain from doing anything too suspicious while she isn't around to keep an eye on him.

But later on, she knows that she'll find something if she keeps digging, keeps spying, keeps tracking his trail until he slips up.

It's just a matter of time, she thinks.

Just a matter of watching this seemingly innocent man until he gives her a good reason to close in.

She won't hesitate as the police have in the past. She won't allow Takashi Shirogane to slip through her fingers like all of her predecessors before her.

She's going to end this, here and now.

And she won't stop, she won't be deterred, no matter what she has to do to get to that point.

Considering everything that he's experienced over the last couple of months, Lance is surprised to find that watching Shiro scooting a chair closer to his tiny, wobbly kitchen table and reaching out a hand to grasp his sister's while they say grace before they all eat Christmas dinner together is perhaps the most bizarre thing that he's ever witnessed in his life.

It's surreal to the extent that he pinches himself under the table when they're finished. That when he opens his eyes, after his niece ends the prayer with a hearty "Amen!" and everyone opens their eyes, he almost expects to look over and find that he's hallucinated the whole thing. It's been a few hours now since he woke up, sure, and he'd thankfully survived the mini heart attack that he'd experienced when he wandered out of his sister's bedroom and walked in on Shiro sitting comfortably on the couch with a mug of hot chocolate grasped in his big hand. He'd babbled incoherently, barely awake enough for such a shock to his system as his sister hummed nonchalantly, seasoning the

turkey at the counter before sliding it into the oven, and his young relatives ate breakfast while chatting excitedly about their most coveted gifts at the table. He's had more than enough time to get used to the picture here, of Shiro actually spending the holiday with his family. Of Shiro, so pale and big and beautiful, dwarfing their tiny, rickety table as he leans in to eat, with a fork that looks like it was made for a doll when he grasps it between his fingers.

He wonders how Shiro manages to go anywhere without looking hilariously oversized. He wonders how a guy like Shiro has possibly managed to fly so low under the police's radar all this time. Keith, sure, probably has some kind of magical powers that cloak him from the eyes of anyone who he doesn't want to be seen by. But Shiro, obviously, does not. And Shiro, even as he awkwardly cuts the edge of his ham with the blunt edge of his fork, even as the hefty piece of meat that he's skewered on the prongs falls down into his gravy-filled potatoes and splatters a mess over the tablecloth—he still manages to look like he's a model in a magazine or a commercial, perhaps selling the paper towel brand that his sister uses to clean up the mess as he apologizes in embarrassment.

And Lance, despite his best efforts, can't help but be mesmerized by the mere sight of him, looking gorgeous and elegant even under the unflattering yellow light that flickers overhead. Even in their tiny kitchen, even awkward and obviously uncomfortable here, among strangers and so out of his element. Bathed in light in place of the darkness that he often cloaks himself in, and so dreadfully, so unfortunately far from Keith.

Lance still hasn't gotten the opportunity to unload that absolute doozy on him either. He isn't sure if he's looking forward to the expression of disbelief when he tells Shiro that he is, in fact, harboring a cannibalistic creature of the night in his bedroom closet, or if he's dreading all of the questions that Shiro will surely ask about how in the world Keith got there in the first place.

He does, however, feel that somehow, if it were even possible for Keith to find a place for himself at this table, shoved on one of the plastic chairs that his sister sits on while she smokes on the balcony, wedged somewhere between himself and Shiro, it might make this Christmas dinner feel more complete. But the sun outside hasn't set entirely, nightfall won't consume the residual sunlight for another few hours. And he knows that Keith wouldn't be able to enjoy the food anyway. He knows that he'd only feel alienated and even weirder when faced with the opportunity to watch humans eating a delicious

dinner that he probably can't even digest. He knows that his presence here would only raise further suspicion from his sister, who, he isn't even sure could see Keith if he were standing right in front of her.

He doesn't entirely understand how Keith's vampire cloaking works at this point. He doesn't know if he can control it, or if there's some aspect to his own discovery of Keith that he still has yet to uncover. He might have been a special case, might have some mysterious powers of his own that have allowed him to spot a vampire even when he doesn't care to be seen. For the life of him, Lance doesn't know why Keith allowed himself to be witnessed that very first night, when he might not have even known that anyone was watching. He doesn't know if he's special because he was born that way, or if maybe he's just special to Keith.

It's an embarrassing thought, and when he chokes on a spoonful of potatoes upon thinking it, his sister apologizes to Shiro for the food being a little dry.

So, instead of torturing himself, he focuses on eating his food. He listens to his niece asking Shiro a myriad of questions about his life, what he does for a living, and he laughs when she asks Shiro if he'd like to listen to her recite all of the states in alphabetical order. Shiro, of course, tells her happily that he'd love to, and he listens to her with a focus that Lance himself is surprised by. It's as though she's telling him the most interesting story that he's ever heard in his life. As though she isn't slowly naming off many states that Shiro himself has probably fled from over time. He 'ooh's and 'ahh's at all of the right moments. Lance watches as his niece lights up, as she becomes only more confident the longer that she goes on. There's something peculiar about his sister's expression as his niece continues to talk and Shiro continues to listen, and Lance wonders if later on, he'll have the opportunity to tease her about finding herself enamored with her little brother's supposed boyfriend.

But Lance realizes, in a profound moment of clarity, that never occurred to him that Shiro might like kids, at least… on a level beyond them being easy pickings for Keith's dinner. He's never taken a moment to consider that perhaps Shiro might have, in a distant past, been a real, autonomous person who wasn't tailing Keith dutifully with the sole purpose of feeding him and cleaning up his messes. That at some point, before any of this, before Keith appeared and possessed him so completely, maybe Shiro even had a family of his own. Maybe even a partner, with whom he planned to eventually have children.

Lance feels saddened by this, weighed down and soaked in a mourning for a life that Shiro might have left behind. He buries his sorrows in his green beans, forking them weakly and shoving them into his mouth, training his eyes to the juice sitting in his glass, to the new stain on the patterned tablecloth, to anything but Shiro's soft eyes twinkling in the yellow light as he smiles down at Lance's niece and commends her for remembering the states so flawlessly.

Veronica's voice breaks him out of his thoughts, and his eyes snap to her suddenly, as she asks Shiro, "So, Ryou, you work at a hospital, right? I've seen you leaving in your scrubs a few times."

Shiro, to his credit, doesn't act suspicious or surprised in the least that Veronica has noticed him. Lance himself feels decidedly uncomfortable, thinking about all of the ways that Veronica could unknowingly identify Shiro if she were to be questioned by the police, but he reassures himself that Shiro should know by now how to cover his tracks. There shouldn't even *be* any police if the three of them play their cards right, and sure, even if things go south, it's not like Shiro and Keith have never fled a town before, but…

The idea that they might someday leave him behind sits heavily in his belly. Heavy enough that he suddenly doesn't feel hungry anymore.

But Shiro's smile perseveres. He seems wholly unaware of Lance's abrupt and unexpected anguish.

"I do," he says smoothly, calmly and with every bit of tact and lightheartedness that Lance doesn't feel right now, "I work the night shift, so I'm gone after the sun sets and back before it rises."

Veronica nods, chewing around a forkful of ham before she continues. She takes a short drink, setting her glass gently and quietly back on the table, but every noise sounds amplified to Lance, muted only by the fervent pounding of his heart. He can hear his blood chugging in his ears. He understands that Veronica definitely isn't the type of person to call the police over something as small as a weird feeling about a person. He knows that a small misstep surely won't lead her to immediately assume that Shiro has to be at the root of that man's disappearance weeks ago, or the street lamp destruction, or the mutilated animals, the ever-present feeling of being watched, or anything strange that's followed him and Keith into this complex—but he can't help but feel on edge. He can't help but run through his growing list of regrets at rapid speed, wondering helplessly if Shiro's stories don't perfectly match any passing thing that Lance has

mentioned to her, if she'll even remember. If she'll corner Lance later on and demand some answers.

And he doesn't trust himself enough to tell her the right thing. He doesn't know what he'll say when he's put under too much pressure.

"It must be hard to fall asleep when the sun comes up then," she says, "I guess that's why you have all of the windows blacked out in your apartment."

Shiro's laugh is breathy and quiet. His smile curls up at the edges, sardonic as his brows pull tightly together.

"Lance was kind enough to recommend the adhesive. Before that, I honestly had no idea what would work aside from buying new curtains. But they're more expensive than newspaper, unfortunately."

Lance shuffles in his seat, poking at his dinner, despondent as Shiro continues to chat idly with Veronica and the children. He thinks about Keith sleeping in that closet in his bedroom. He thinks about everything that had to happen to get them to this exact point in time, this exact situation. He isn't sure if it was fate, or some part of his destiny that brought him, Keith, and Shiro together. And he wonders if it's even possible for him to make things better for either of them.

It seems, right now, that Shiro is happy. It seems like this might be the first time that he's celebrated the holidays in, well… Lance isn't sure. But he's more excited as he talks, as he eats, as he breathes in the atmosphere here than Lance has seen him since they met. He seems more at ease in this situation than Lance could have ever imagined him being, had he ever taken a moment to consider that this sort of thing could ever even be a possibility.

He has a feeling that Keith wouldn't accept this with quite the same level of finesse, but Shiro, he reminds himself, seems to have retained some level of his humanity, while Keith, apparently, has not. It's not fair to compare the two of them, to think that Keith should be able to sit down with his family and eat when he can't digest the food. When the lights would be too bright and they'd hurt his eyes, make him dizzy and uncomfortable and unfocused in the ways that Lance has witnessed fleetingly before all of the street lamps went out.

Keith doesn't even seem completely comfortable in his own skin when he's entirely in his element. He doesn't seem to realize exactly what he is.

And Lance wonders if he can change that, and what might change if he embraces a life like that, with Shiro and with Keith, harboring this secret and scrambling constantly to provide proper sustenance for a monster that can't hunt or feed without killing a human.

It makes just about as much sense now as it doesn't. As his questions are answered, dozens more float to the surface of his thoughts. Shiro is in love with Keith, there's no doubt about that. And Keith, at the very least, has a soft spot for Shiro. They came together years ago under mysterious circumstances and they've been traveling together ever since. There was a catalyst for that—some big event that caused Shiro to feel indebted, Keith to feel responsible. And Lance suspects that their wires have become too crossed over the decades to recognize that. That Keith interprets that moment as something terrible that he did. That Shiro, instead, considers it to be a miracle.

He wonders exactly what it might have been. He wonders how bad it could be, finding oneself tied for an eternity to a creature that only asks for blood in exchange for immortality. He doesn't know if he could watch his family grow old and die around him. He doesn't know if he'd be strong enough to leave them behind.

He wonders who might have been waiting for Shiro, back then, and for how many years they waited. If Shiro left behind someone who loved him and worried about him, and if he felt remorse when he did it. If he even had a choice.

Lance knows that Veronica is gradually closing her scissors around the metaphorical apron strings that bind him here. He knows that she's been giving him testing shoves, trying to coax him out of the nest. But he also knows that it's hard enough to stay afloat here with the two of them, and he doesn't know how she'd fair on her own. He doesn't want to make a decision and regret it later, to realize in hindsight, only when it's too late, that he made a bad call. He screwed over his family. He did a selfish thing that he can never reverse, and in his path, left behind, his family will only suffer because of it.

He likes to tell himself that he has time, but he isn't too sure anymore. He doesn't know how many times Keith might be willing to feed from Shiro after everything that happened last night, and he definitely doubts that Keith would be willing to accept his own blood in Shiro's place. There's one murder under Shiro's belt already, but there aren't that many people in this town. A random killing, Lance hopes, might not draw too much attention, but if the police aren't following a trail already, he fears that another disappearance might swiftly narrow

things down.

He trusts Shiro to be smart about this. He doesn't know how many years it's been, but it seems like it's been a long time. Shiro talks as though the moving and the hiding, as though this whole lifestyle became mundane and robotic a long time ago, as though it's just as natural to him now as Lance feels about walking his niece to the bus every morning.

But he can feel the time limit creeping up on him nonetheless. He knows that Keith and Shiro can't stay here unnoticed forever. He knows that, sooner than later, something is going to happen. They'll have to leave, and he isn't sure if he'll ever be completely ready to make that decision—to stay here or leave, to commit or drag his feet—and he especially doesn't know if he'll be ready to make that choice before he runs out of time.

He feels dread, suddenly. He feels antsy, jittery and discontented. He wishes that he could go outside and take a short walk around the apartment complex. He wishes that Shiro would excuse himself for an after-dinner cigarette and that Lance could offer to join him.

He wishes that he could talk to Keith. He feels right now, that maybe if he could see him, everything would make a lot more sense. At the very least, the decision to leave would be more tempting. He'd feel less guilty fantasizing about the warm beaches of Florida, the sand between his toes and the water lapping at his heels. He wouldn't ever graduate from college, but he could live somewhere warm. He could stay in a place that's bright and welcoming, fall asleep early in the morning wrapped up between Keith and Shiro, and he could feel, perhaps, as though he was doing more than festering like he is here, now.

Dinner passes slowly. Lance finds himself distracted by his thoughts through the vast majority of it. Veronica turns Shiro away when he offers to help with the dishes, telling him to go relax for now, to make himself comfortable because she likes the calmness of cleaning up after. And surprisingly, when Lance wanders over to dry, she swats his hands away from the towel as well. With a soapy spoon, she points towards Shiro's dark figure through the sliding glass window. The sun outside is just beginning to set, the sky marked with long lines of deep pink and vibrant oranges, cloudy but more colorful than it's seemed for weeks.

Shiro is smoking, and he's poking around, tapping one of their rickety

lawn chairs with his foot as though contemplating whether or not it might accommodate his weight. Veronica tells Lance, “You want alone time, right? Go talk to your boyfriend.”

And Lance finds that, even though he sputters, and even as his cheeks take on a heat and a pinkness that he can’t control despite his best efforts, he doesn’t have the strength to argue with her. He drops his shoulders, sighing loudly as though this might be some kind of task for him. If only to play the role of the petulant little brother. If only to earn the sardonic grin that Veronica offers him before pretending that she might smack him with the wet mixing spoon.

“I guess if I have to,” he draws out, low and long and sing-song as he lopes towards the door, “But only because I love you so much, Veronica.”

Her laughter is cut off as he slides open the door, stepping out in socked feet and shivering in the crisp evening air before closing it behind him. Shiro is leaning against the guard rail now, his cigarette hanging loosely from his lips as he watches the sun’s slow descent behind the leafless skeletons of dark trees.

Shiro turns slightly, just enough to catch his eye and offer him a small, friendly smile in welcome. His fingers creep upward to grasp at the filter of his cigarette, pulling it from his lips and flicking the ash from the cherry as he exhales a thick mixture of smoke and warm, foggy breath that lingers in the cold air.

“Your sister is very nice,” Shiro tells him, “The kids are good kids. You have a very loving family.”

Lance steers around one of the lawn chairs, plopping himself down into the seat and scooting until his back hits the cold plastic. He lays his arms on the armrests, propping his head against one hand and watching Shiro’s figure, still and quiet, but undeniably content.

“You’re trying to tell me that I shouldn’t go with you.”

It’s the elephant in the room anyway, Lance feels as though it’s pointless to keep ignoring it.

Shiro sighs.

He rolls his shoulders back, turning slightly in place and holding his cigarette between his index and middle fingers. He leans some of his weight against the guardrail, his brows drawn low and knitted close

together. His skin is pale and translucent in the dwindling light, reflecting the orange hues of the dying sun but bleeding no discernable tint of its own.

This is the first time that Lance considers that Shiro, too, might be half-alive. He looks more like a ghost lingering on this balcony than a person who holds a corporeal form. Lance feels as though he might be able to reach out and disrupt the reflection of him, as he might be able to distort the image of the moon reflected on ocean water. He feels right now as though all of this is only partially real. As though, any moment now, he'll wake up to the sound of his alarm and he'll realize that Christmas still isn't for another few days.

Shiro pushes out a slow sigh. He flicks the remaining ash from his cigarette, dithering for a moment before tossing the butt into the overfilled ashtray that Veronica left at their feet.

"I didn't have anyone to leave behind back then," Shiro tells him, "So I can't tell you if I would have regretted doing so or not, but…"

He turns his gaze again to the darkening courtyard, to his own rusted car, reflecting the dim orange light of the sun, powdered with snow, unsightly and barely alive, like a single dark stain among all of the peaceful white. He looks then to the blacked out windows of his apartment, just across the courtyard. He seems to be struggling to piece something together, seems to sense in some shape or form that Keith isn't tucked away beyond that black as he should be. Lance isn't sure if they have some kind of connection or not, but he knows that Keith found his window last night with startling accuracy, and that he knew that Shiro would be holed up in Lance's bedroom without any reason to believe so prior.

Shiro bites off something that might be a laugh or another sigh. He isn't looking at Lance, but he draws his fingers over the line of the guardrail, slipping over the ice and knocking snow from the ledge into the belly of the courtyard below. His expression now is tender and distant. Lance's eyes drag from the slack line of his jaw to his low shoulders, to his fingers working slow paths back and forth over the rail.

"Someday, Lance, your niece and nephews, and your sister—they're going to die, and you won't. You're going to outlive them for centuries. You'll outlive their kids and grandkids. You'll stick around for so long that your bloodline might completely end. So… I can't make this decision for you, but you need to think about that. You

need to decide whether or not you're okay with that. And… if you'll be willing to outlive every single person who you've ever known."

Lance's eyes find the ground between their feet. They focus hard and long on his socks, dirtied slightly from walking out here, wet at the toes where he'd stepped in stray ice and fallen snow.

"All of my friends from before…" Shiro's voice feels far away, and his tone is even but so quiet that it's barely more than the gentle wind that threads itself through Lance's hair. "They're all in retirement homes now. People who I graduated with have children who look older than me. And they'll die, their kids will die, and I'm still going to be the same."

Shiro turns to him then, his eyes glistening in the last reaches of the sun. The light behind him casts a halo of gold over his ivory hair. He's wearing only his button-up and pants, and his damp socks. But his nose isn't pink from the cold, his cheeks aren't swatched with color. He looks to Lance like a painting, just before all of the details are added in. He looks unfinished here, lacking in something substantial that might pull the full image together.

But Shiro, Lance knows, might never find the thing that he needs, that might make him whole again. He's empty and reaching desperately for that companionship, but Keith isn't strong enough to provide it. Keith stays just out of his reach, afraid, maybe, of being needed too much. Afraid of ruining him more than he thinks that he already did. Afraid of committing fully, after doing this to Shiro in the first place.

As though, if he touches him again, if he allows himself to be weak and needy and to grasp what he wants, he might finally break Shiro irreparably, once and for all.

Lance doesn't tell Shiro that he wants to be the person to fix him. He doesn't tell Shiro that he's beautiful and kind, that Lance would be a fool not to be tempted by him, standing here, and offering an eternity where the three of them could exist, in love, together forever.

He draws in a long breath, flicking his gaze from Shiro's handsome, lost expression to the bright ball of the sun setting slowly, dying gradually behind the cage of dark buildings and dead trees. He listens to the cawing of crows amplified in the basin of the courtyard below them, the crunch of snow under the boots of a man, heading out to his car, cleaning the snow from it, before opening the door and tucking inside.

Lance allows the moments to drag out between them, allows the sky to fade from orange, to gray, into a deep navy and inky black before he finally turns his eyes back to Shiro, quiet, as he lights another cigarette.

“Keith should be waking up soon,” Lance says instead of anything else, anything pertinent or pressing, and all of the thoughts that he isn’t strong enough to think right now, “He’s in my room. In the closet.”

And at the very least, Shiro’s look of surprise is worth it. The way that he drops his lit cigarette into the snow below is worth it.

And his belated realization, after everything that he’s said, that Lance has already become far too invested in all of this to turn away now—

Well, that too is definitely worth it.

Chapter End Notes

> Guess who forgot to check her calendar to make sure that the next chapter of her story didn't fall on literally the exact same day that the final season drops?

Chapter 12

At first, Lance has a feeling that Shiro doesn't entirely believe him when he tries to convince him that Keith really is in his apartment and he isn't just playing some kind of strange, pointless prank on him. While not completely within Lance's character to be coherent enough around a guy like Shiro to actually pull a practical joke on him, he can't deny that the doubt is in any shape or form unreasonable. It still feels surreal to remember that he has such a powerful, mysterious, and deadly creature sleeping peacefully behind the electrical-tape sealed closet door that he's been using without incident for the last few years. It feels like an uncanny and wholly unexpected clash of the mundane and the extraordinary to consider the hurdles that his life has made in the previous months to get him to this exact place in time. It feels as though, just by knowing that Keith is hiding in there, he's broken some fundamental law of the universe. As though reality itself might unhinge and spit all of humanity into a void of nothingness just because he's taken advantage of this glitch in the Matrix now that it's presented itself to him.

It's not unreasonable for Shiro to doubt him. Lance has a feeling that any other, more reasonable person might not be as eager to get themselves involved in this monster drama as he apparently is. Lance doesn't know if Keith or Shiro have ever had a relationship with an outsider as intimate as theirs is, and if maybe someone else in the past might have pushed them away when things got weird like this.

But he knows that Shiro is surprised even when he finally leads him into his bedroom to prove that he wasn't lying about any of this earlier. And he wonders if life would be easier for him going forward if he never made any decisions to insert himself into their lives like this ever again.

Or, if he'd ever be strong enough for self-preserving enough to untangle himself from their story.

Lance is careful when he peels the tape from each corner of the door. He's locked himself and Shiro safely in his bedroom, away from the prying eyes of his family, but he's making a point of being quiet anyway. Veronica had already sent him a smug, knowing smile when he'd told her that he needed to show Shiro something alone in his room, as though she'd had any way of knowing exactly what he'd needed so desperately to show Shiro without sharing with anyone else

in the apartment. He'd almost laughed at the thought of it, at the mere idea that Veronica could have any notion of what he's been harboring in his closet since last night. He knows that her thoughts are far less "bloodthirsty night-creature" and further into adult territory, and while the idea of that causes a searing heat to tear under his skin, while he can't deny that he'd love more than anything to shove Shiro onto the mattress and resume all of the terrible, humiliating things that he'd wanted to do to him last night, well… There are more pertinent issues to attend to right now. And maybe later, after all is said and done, they can move on from this stuffy reconciliation to greener pastures.

Namely, things like kissing, or spooning together on the bed, or Keith and Shiro showing him exactly what sorts of things Keith's fascinating inhuman body is capable of behind closed doors.

He clears his throat, shaking a small piece of electrical tape from the corner of his sleeve where it's gotten stuck to him. Now is really not the time. Later—when Shiro isn't watching him expectantly and he can't hear something moving around behind the closet door—he might give himself a nice, long evening alone to explore all of the possibilities in his thoughts.

When he turns the knob and pulls the door open, he shouldn't be surprised to see Keith curled up on the floor, wrapped in a few layers of blankets and blinking up at him with dark and dilated pupils, but somehow, he still is. It nearly knocks the wind out of him, watching quietly, shaking subtly, as Keith's black eyes fix themselves first, on himself, before creeping gradually to Shiro. And Shiro himself seems caught between doing many things. At first, he hesitates, at first, he only bites his lip as color floods his cheeks. But then he jerks forward, halting just as fast. He almost throws himself towards Keith, and Lance can imagine how tenderly he'd hold him, how he'd apologize and the two of them could finally talk. And things, maybe, could start to get better, starting by clearing up the disagreement that they had the other night. Shiro would be tender and he'd hold Keith in a way that wouldn't allude in any manner to the ferocity that Lance knows that Keith is entirely too capable of. And maybe Keith's eyes would grow soft in the same way that they looked last night. Maybe he would be placated beneath the warm weight of Shiro's body, he'd allow himself to be held and to be comforted, and finally, after so many misunderstandings, they'd find themselves rooted in their common wants and needs and goals instead of being separated for many more decades by a chasm of misplaced guilt, and loneliness and quiet martyrdom.

But that can only happen if Shiro actually makes a move, and after an agonizingly long stretch of silence, Lance realizes that he's not actually planning on doing much of anything until Keith finally shoves up from the floor and looks at both of them.

"You look better," Keith says to Shiro, his expression guarded, his voice quiet and even, "Lance took good care of you."

It isn't an insult in any shape or form, but something about it still stings. Something about it still feels snide and dripped in poison, and Shiro doesn't seem to be immune to the bite of it either. He flicks his gaze down to the floor and eases back. He's nibbling on his lip, dragging his eyes towards the bedroom door as though he's considering leaving now and putting off this reunion for a better time. Shiro looks emasculated and deflated now, in a way that Lance has never seen him. There's a quiet, sweet confidence that Lance has never recognized in Shiro until this very moment, now that it's gone. Lance, for the first time, resists the urge to pin the blame on Keith. He reminds himself that he doesn't know everything about this situation, but from what he's collected, something very bad happened between them. Shiro might have messed up. Keith might have run away too soon. And this tangled web of confusing misconstructions twines itself so far back into their personal history that he might never be able to wrap his head around it fully.

Lance understands that the two of them have a lot of baggage that he doesn't know about, and he knows that it must have been hard to survive for this long without having any big blowouts. But he's also starting to get the feeling that the two of them make a lot of their own misery. They refuse to talk things out, to consider that they aren't at fault in every bad situation—and they're stupid. They're so, so stupid. They can't see the fact that's big and blaring and painfully obvious even as it flaunts itself right in front of their dumb faces:

They're both still in love with each other.

They both want nothing more than to stop fighting and finally get along.

But they won't see it if they don't talk. They'll just keep making these same mistakes for months and years and even centuries longer, and Lance realizes that his role here, his destiny, even, might be just to finally convince these two immortal morons to be honest with themselves and each other, so they can finally start living a happy eternal life.

He sighs, dragging a hand through his hair.

“Okay,” he says carefully, tapping his foot a few times on the floor and crossing his arms over his chest, “Keith, I know you feel bad about almost killing Shiro—Ah-ah, no, hold on, buddy! I’m not done!”

He raises a finger, shoving it forward so that it jabs just inches away from Keith’s face. He stops him just as he tries to interrupt, putting on his most demanding, respectable “Mean Uncle Lance” expression before pulling his arm back to cross with the other yet again.

Keith glowers at him, and for a moment, he’d been worried that he might open his mouth and bite into his finger, but otherwise, he stays quiet. Huffing silently and drawing his brows low together, but surprisingly eager to step down and allow Lance to take the floor.

“I’m not done, vampire-boy! You had your chance to talk, and you didn’t! So now it’s Lance-time. Just let me work my magic.”

Keith’s fiery glare deepens, but he doesn’t press further. When Lance takes a moment to compose himself, he can’t help but look to Shiro for some semblance of comfort in his presence, and the small smile that he’s masking behind his hand makes all of this feel worth it, even as he’s swiftly caving under the pressure that he’s so abruptly placed onto his own shoulders.

“L-listen, okay? I… I know you blame yourself, but Shiro blames himself too, you know? He keeps telling me how he pushed you too hard and how guilty he feels, but why don’t you guys ever say these things to each other? I mean, you barely even know me, and you’re more willing to tell *me* that you feel bad for turning Shiro into… well, whatever he is? And Shiro—”

He turns in Shiro’s direction, feeling far safer reaching out and placing a gentle hand on his shoulder than he might have felt with Keith, for whatever reason. Maybe he’s just confident that Shiro won’t bite him. Maybe he just understands that Shiro doesn’t have a more evident temper, or that he feels more comfortable being touched unannounced than Keith seems to.

“—I know that you feel… like you aren’t good enough. But you are, man. Keith thinks the world of you, can’t you tell? He begged me to let him in last night so he could make sure that you were okay, and he doesn’t want to hurt you. You guys are all that you have, and you just… you need to start communicating better. Because… because you’re family, right? You’re the only family that either of you has

anymore."

Shiro's mouth is a thin line, his eyes averted away from Lance and his gaze resting firmly on the floor between him and Keith. In a slow, hesitant motion, he turns his chin up and his eyes towards Lance, the edges of his lips curling up in a small smile, color rising to his cheeks as his hand travels up to grasp Lance's against his shoulder. Lance's breath staggers at the sensation of being touched, and it's hard to hold Shiro's gaze when it's so heavy and sad. But he knows that this is the right decision to make, he can feel it. It might hurt in the moment, but in the long run, this is a conversation that will benefit them greatly.

Shiro doesn't look at Keith, but his smile knocks the wind out of Lance's lungs, kicking it from his sails in one fell swoop of two pretty lips, and a slide of those dark eyes over his heated skin. He can't think of anything else to say. He feels profoundly guilty for ignoring Keith while he'd been trying so hard to bring all three of them together. He'd wanted to unite them in this moment, to make the two of them understand that they've been on the same side all along. He feels like he's failed at that, but he can't feel too guilty when he knows that he's, at least, made Shiro smile.

And when Shiro finally speaks, finally looks in Keith's direction, Lance wonders if maybe he's better at this than he's ever been willing to give himself credit for.

"I'm so sorry, Keith," Shiro says, "For pushing you like that last night. I felt guilty for dragging you here, and… not being able to provide for you as I promised, but… I shouldn't have put you through that. I knew that you'd never even consider punishing me for letting you down, so… I forced you to. And that wasn't fair, it wasn't right. But I let you down, and… I'm sorry."

The expression that Keith wears in response to Shiro's words is enough to pinch something deep within Lance's heart. His big, dark eyes are wide and his brows are low and pushed close together. His lips are drawn thin, his jaw tight and hard. Lance clears his throat in an attempt to find words, squeezing Shiro's hand as though to draw strength from him, but he realizes that it's more difficult to be hard on Keith than he might have originally anticipated. At the moment, Keith isn't a monster and he isn't an unfeeling thing, taking what he needs with no regard for the people around him. He's confused and he's scared and lost. He's hurting in a way that Lance isn't sure that he could ever live long enough to understand. He can't find words while he's looking at him, can't think straight for long enough to articulate

even the smallest apology for blaming this on him before he even knew all of the facts.

Lance drowns in all of the almosts and maybes that swirl in his thoughts. He's astounded in the face of something inhuman wearing such a vulnerable expression. The frayed edges of his thoughts spark with possibilities, of everything that he could say or do right now to make Keith feel better, even though, inevitably, he does nothing but stand here uselessly.

Keith heaves a sigh, which wouldn't be too abnormal, if not for the fact that Lance has never seen him breathe before. It's hilariously ludicrous to realize that he's doing it literally just for the dramatic effect, and it takes every ounce of Lance's willpower not to break the seriousness of their current situation by laughing.

Keith, without much regard for Lance's cracked expression or Shiro's heavy silence, pushes himself up from his backside to his feet. He stretches then, still as lithe and filled out as he was last night, still beguiling in that short t-shirt and still made up of the same soft, poreless skin wrapped so gracefully around perfectly sculpted muscles that Lance has a lot of trouble not staring at the exposed length of those tantalizing, milky thighs for too long.

He shoves past them both, scratching a hand at the back of his head as he lopes across the room and peers through the window out into the thick blanket of night. The lights in the bedroom are dim enough that he doesn't seem to be bothered by them, but he does take a moment to look at the lamp on the desk, as though contemplating taking it and breaking the bulb in his hands. With his back to them, in the lingering silence, Keith doesn't act as though he plans on forgiving Shiro, on accepting that apology or having any sort of conversation about what's happened. He's notably less chatty than he was last night, and Lance wonders if the moment that they shared while Shiro slept was something very unique, something to be held in higher esteem than he'd paid it the respect last night. He wonders if Shiro would be surprised if he told him that Keith let him hold his hand. He wonders if the normal, everyday Keith might be even pricklier than he might have ever had any way of knowing.

But finally, after a long time passes in quiet, Keith speaks. He still keeps himself turned away, leaves his hands dangling at his sides as his shoulders roll back to work out the tension of sleeping on the floor. But his voice is stronger and more focused than usual, just as it was last night. Despite everything, Lance can't help but revel in the

difference that feeding makes for him, how real he seems now, how more charming and less terrifying than Keith always feels in his memories.

“You said that you wanted to be involved in this,” Keith says then, “Do you still believe that? Do you still want that?”

And then, finally, gradually, he turns around. His gaze is suddenly pinned on Lance so heavily that Lance feels glued in place. Like a fly in a trap, watching the spider draw nearer with no fear or trepidation, but adoration.

Lance nods dumbly, stumbling over his words, feeling as though his thoughts have been scrambled so many times that he might never remember how to speak again.

Shiro’s hand in his is heavy and comforting, and it anchors him when Shiro squeezes it. He jerks his head away from Keith and turns it up instead to look to Shiro, who is still smiling, surprisingly seeming less dreadful, less doubtful of this whole situation than he’s ever seemed prior.

Lance can’t stop thinking about what Shiro told him earlier, about how he’s outlived everyone who he used to know when he was human. How Lance himself will outlive his own relatives by hundreds of years. How the world will continue to move forward and change while he stays the same, and how there isn’t any stopping it once it starts. Undying, unchanged, unhindered. Lance doesn’t know if he’s prepared for a life like that. He doesn’t know if he has what it takes to find himself stalled in the eye of an ever-evolving universe.

But he realizes that *this* —this possibility, this offer of a life so different and more exciting, more interesting and colorful than anything that he’s ever dreamed of before—it’s too tempting to ignore. Keith is beautiful and deadly and mysterious. Shiro is handsome and charming and kind.

He wonders if anyone in the world knows exactly what they want. If they could ever know what they’re investing in before they make their most important decisions.

He wonders if he’ll ever get what he wants if he never takes a gamble, never reaches for it, never puts himself on the line in order to pursue the things that tempt him.

He squeezes Shiro’s hand again, he turns his eyes back to Keith.

“I still want it,” he says, “Whatever’s going on with you guys, if—if you want me, I… I want to be part of it too.”

Lance McClain, in every clear and concise way, in every manner that might matter to the people who Detective Sanda spends her days working with, is nothing but unremarkable, innocent, and frustratingly perfect plain and clean. He’s a B student taking online classes part-time. He works two jobs, forty hours each a week—an evening shift at a small convenience store, and an overnight shift Monday through Saturday at the local middle school. He lives with his sister and her three kids. Sanda has seen him in passing, once spoke to him fleetingly at the counter of the convenience store when the weather outside had become dreadful enough that Lance had told her to be careful driving home. She doesn’t think that he would recognize her by name, but maybe by her face. Maybe as a person passing with the perpetual loop of customers through the store who he might serve but never spend time getting to know to a less shallow degree. Maybe he would have a vague recollection of their infrequent conversations if someone were to describe her in detail to him.

This town is small enough that she’s familiar with the locals, and she couldn’t stop herself from being suspicious, from giving in to the tiny, buzzing voice in the back of her thoughts that the last tragedy this town had seen was the loss of the McClains over a decade ago. She’d vaguely recognized him as the boy who other townsfolk would often whisper about—Lance McClain stalled in the tragedy of his parents’ terrible, untimely deaths. The boy who never had a chance, but to find himself chained to this town at those dead-end jobs, caring for his sister’s wedlock children and toiling away the days until he could fade into anonymity as well.

Lance McClain, as a person, isn’t remotely suspicious. He seems to be entirely too busy in his regular day-to-day to follow through with even half of the strange occurrences that have wracked the town over the previous few months. But something about him has always bothered her. Something has always felt a little off. She can’t deny that she might just be chasing a lingering feeling of discontent, the concept that perhaps Lance hasn’t done anything wrong yet, but he seems entirely too capable. He’s never been rude to her when she’s visited the convenience store, and he’s never behaved in a way that might

allude to some darkness sleeping impatiently inside of him.

But there's a solemn sadness to him that she can't ever seem to shake. His presence here, in this town, is a reminder of a dark smudge on the history, a terrible thing that she doesn't want to be reminded of.

It might make it easier if Lance could reveal himself as a bad person as well. It might alleviate the guilt and the melancholy that he seems to radiate every time that she sees him.

She doesn't know if it's one thing, or many, that set off the alarms in her head when she thinks of him. He seems predisposed to *something* , that she just can't ever seem to put her finger on. She's wanted so desperately to connect him to all of this, and even now, she isn't sure if these new discoveries are the fruit of her labor or simply her own biases confirming what she wanted to believe.

But Lance lives in the apartment complex that she's been circling. The same one where the mysterious Ryou Yamazaki lives alone. She isn't sure if she's reaching when she researches it, when she scours a rarely-used facebook account and flips through aged pictures of a younger Lance smiling with parents long-dead. Holding babies, slinging his arms over the shoulders of another sister and two brothers that haven't visited since their parents died.

Sanda feels like a crazy person while she's thumbing through this boy's life, but she can't scratch the itch that compelled her to do so. She doesn't know why it's so hard to ignore the small coincidences and focus instead on the big picture. Her only lead is that Ryou slightly resembles one of the first victims of a could-be serial killer who would be pushing sixty by now. And that Ryou moved here just weeks before the first disappearance, just days before the street lamps all gradually started getting busted out. Just around the time when the local wildlife began to pop up, mutilated, in ponds and on the side of lesser-used roads. Lance McClain doesn't suit the role of a criminal just yet, in the middle of the night, lighted only by the blue glow of her computer screen, bent over a cooled cup of coffee and clicking idly with her mouse to flip through the various toothy grins that Lance has chosen to showcase in his limited photo album. Lance McClain doesn't look like a monster in these photos, and he definitely never seems like more than a hopeless, directionless youth wasting away in a dead-end town each time that he rings her out at the convenience store. But something ties him to a man who might be the real murderer. There's no possible reason why Ryou could be connected to a string of murders spanning thirty years, dozens of states and cities,

aside from that fact that he vaguely resembles a man assumed long-dead. None of this makes sense at face value, but maybe it's just getting late.

Maybe she's grown so desperate to get to the bottom of this that she's considering every option, even the crazy ones. Even the conspiracy that somehow, Ryou could be Takashi Shirogane, a missing, 25-year-old med student from 1984. Maybe he's some kind of ghost, or a monster, or a shapeshifter that's stolen Lance McClain's form. She feels foolish for even wasting her time contemplating this. She wonders, sardonically, if her love of horror movies clouds her judgment, and if perhaps this is why her peers regard her as an obsessive lunatic. But she knows that something strange is going on here. When she'd searched the mysterious symptoms of this town's sickness earlier online, she'd been redirected to many sites citing crop-circles, animal deaths, fires, and drought. Demonic possessions. Evil fermenting itself in the topsoil of unfortunate small towns and rotting them from the ground up.

She can sense a darkness taking hold of this place, can feel it like smoke in the air. This town is polluted now. Something sinister has swept in and made a home for itself here. And no one is willing to believe her when she says it. No one is willing to admit that the first missing wouldn't be the last. He wasn't just a drunk who wandered off and found himself caught in the claws of a hungry cougar. He wasn't just a miserable idiot who stumbled down an icy hill into a creek and drowned in water barely up to an adult's ankles.

There was no body left behind. There was no blood, no footprints, no proof left to easily identify what might have happened to that man. It's as though he was there, for a moment, then gone. As though he dissipated into the darkness slowly coiling itself around this town, constricting and squeezing and smothering them long before anyone but Sanda is able to recognize that they're doomed.

This town—the police force, the doctors, the clergy and the citizens—they're determined to sweep the truth under the rug, if only to preserve a naive sense of safety, a misplaced and dangerous belief that there's nothing in the world that can hurt them, nothing stronger or smarter or evil enough to pick them off one by one, if only to quench its own insatiable hunger.

Maybe Lance McClain isn't at the center of this. Maybe he's not the right place to look. But, at the very least, he's somewhere to start.

Sanda finds herself staring at a picture of Lance, as a child, held up in the arms of a grinning man and laughing woman who seem, in this photo, to love him more than anything in the entire world. The sun behind them is bright and yellow, the sky is a clear, cloudless and deep vibrant blue. There's sand behind them, between their toes. They're wearing bathing suits, and Lance's little nose is splotched with a thick white line of sunscreen. They look happy, normal. They look bright and kind and hopeful, and everything that this town, this dark, terrible place, and even Lance, now, is not.

She doesn't know how a child with so much adoration in his eyes could grow up to be a killer. She doesn't know how a person so innocent could find themselves tangled so desperately in the center of something so evil, so foreboding and inescapable as a demon, or a monster, or a person who murders for sport.

She doesn't know how Lance McClain ties into this, or if he even does at all.

But she's determined that, in time, she's going to find out.

They're outside again, in the cold dark with their breath lingering in the air long after each staggered, shaking breath. Lance is shivering with his hands shoved deep inside of his coat pockets, leaning in close to Shiro without the nerve to touch him, but knowing that he definitely wouldn't be confident enough to seek the same warmth from Keith, across from him.

And he isn't even sure if Keith would be warm, even if he were brave enough to touch him as he touched him last night.

Keith had slipped out through the window earlier, citing his discomfort with lingering in a home that he hadn't completely been welcomed into for too long. Shiro had taken a short moment after he'd left to explain that Keith has never been very good at filling spaces with too many people. That he slips through their apartment window most nights just to seek refuge in the woods, far away from the endless pattering of pulses and the smell of sweet, warm blood through the interconnected walls. Lance connects this explanation with the feeling of smelling the nacho cheese in the convenience store when he hasn't had time to eat before his shift. How easy it might be

to pilfer a paper tray of chips and steal some, and how delicious of a meal it would be before his boss caught him on camera the next day and either fired him, took the price from his next paycheck, or both. He thinks about how it might feel to be a cat watching birds chirping just beyond the glass of a window seat. He remembers that Hunk's family used to own one that would spend hours admiring the wildlife outside, never allowed to venture out in fear of coyotes or cars maiming it. But it would watch the squirrels and the robins and the rabbits and deer in the distance, and it would chitter in a restless sort of way as its fur stood on end. Lance can easily envision Keith as a restless house cat, but he knows that the aftermath of slipping up, for him, would be far more dire than a few dead birds.

He understands with a weight in his belly exactly how desperately Keith must need to escape sometimes.

And he wonders, fretfully, how many times Keith has come too close to hurting him as well. How easy he's made it for him, and how cruel of a game it truly was to dangle himself so deliciously right in front of Keith's starving lips when he'd offered him his wrist.

It's not that Keith is a monster who lacks self-control. It's not that he's sinister or heartless, or that he can't stop himself from killing things for very long.

The curse of this, the cross that he bares, it's that he feels empathy and compassion, while his condition requires him to feel anything but. It goes directly against his nature to care, to mourn the dead that he's maimed, the humans who he's attacked in order to feed himself. If he's to survive, people will have to suffer and die. And if he doesn't eat…

He'll wither away, but from the implications, Lance isn't sure if he'd ever be allowed to actually not exist. For all Lance knows, he could just suffer, and suffer until someday he finally broke his resolve and killed more people than fasting could have ever saved.

He isn't sure. But he knows Shiro, and he wants to know Keith, and he understands that they've been together for a very long time. And if there was a better way, a kinder, easier way to do any of this, he's sure that they would have done it instead.

But they're outside now in the cold, standing close in a small circle in Lance and Shiro's regular smoking spot. Shiro hesitates for a moment before he leans in closer to Lance. Their sides bump awkwardly before

resting together. Shiro feels warm and firm, and the length of his arm would feel so wonderful if it were to wrap around his shoulders, if either of them were brave enough to lace together their fingers. Lance is overwhelmed with a sense that he would like to be closer to both of them. He thinks that even if Keith's skin were to be cold, he could warm him up. He wonders how the two of them sleep together when they're alone, if they tangle their limbs and press close, or if the emotional distance manifests itself in physicality as well.

He has a lot of questions for them, and he knows that now is the right time to ask. No one speaks, and he knows that they're waiting for him to start. He knows that they won't offer any extra information unless he requests it of them and that after this moment is over, they might not feel as inclined to clue him in. They're tight-lipped on the best days, he knows this as well. Shiro can be nothing short of a brick wall on the worst. But he's agreed to do whatever it takes to help them and join them, and he knows that they feel indebted enough now that they might be willing to divulge all of the information that's been bugging him for weeks.

So he starts with, "What are you—both of you? Is Shiro human? Is Keith really a vampire?"

And he's disappointed to learn that neither of them actually know.

Keith blows out another dramatic fake breath, and Lance is just about as displeased as he is invigorated to learn that a well-fed Keith is more standoffish and snarky than his starving counterpart.

"I woke up like this," Keith says curtly, and while the words evoke a vivid mental image of that exact slogan on a nightshirt that his sister wears frequently, Lance doesn't have the nerve to make a joke about it before the moment is gone with Keith's following words, "A few hundred years ago, I don't know. I woke up wrapped in a blanket under… a bridge. And I was hungry, and I didn't remember anything that happened before that, but…"

He darts his gaze away, crossing his arms over his chest. Shiro intervenes, as Keith is clearly uncomfortable continuing. Lance cranes his neck to look to Shiro then—into his dark, hooded eyes and the glint of his white smile illuminated only by the dim moonlight through the trees.

"He traveled alone for a long time after that. Then… about thirty years ago, we met. And I died, but… Keith brought me back just in

time. I think we're connected through that—through… his blood saving me. I wouldn't call it a superpower by any means—"

He laughs, his smile wry and his eyes crinkling around the edges as he points his chin to the sky, gazing in memory at the obscured, dark outline of the moon through the clouds.

"—but I can sense where Keith is, in general. I was wondering earlier why he felt so close, but… of course, he was close. My health is better when Keith is well-fed, and… I can't die. At least, if Keith is alive, I can't die, and neither of us really know if he even *can* die. So… that's really all that we know. Your vampire theory seems to be the closest guess, but garlic and dead man's blood don't affect him. And unfortunately, he can't transform into a bat either."

Keith scoffs, sending Shiro an extended curt and clearly disgruntled glare before turning his attention back to Lance. In the moonlight, he's nearly translucent—white skin shimmering like the snow, like bone under skin, poreless as ever and almost too perfect to believe in. His eyes, again, are dark and nearly black, and his hair is softer now, less brassy and messy and framing his pallid cheeks in wispy curls. He's still dressed in only a long t-shirt, the hem of which encases his thighs in a way that makes warmth blossom under Lance's skin. He tries his hardest to keep his eyes on Keith's face, lest he find himself lost again in the uncomfortable and awkward lust in the thick of such an important conversation, but he feels a strong sense of pity for Shiro, being forced to be presentable and clear-headed in the presence of such a beautiful creature. Shiro himself is gorgeous, Lance can't deny that, but at least he isn't half naked. If the two of them were undressed here, Lance isn't sure if he would survive it.

But Keith, now, is watching him closely, and Lance has a hard time not feeling like a mouse trapped under a cat's paw. He feels at his mercy, bewildered and caught in the headlights of eyes so transfixing that they have him stuck in place. It's a strange, cold feeling, colder than the winter chill and the evening wind pushing powdery snow from the swaying branches of the trees. He finds it hard to breathe, or to think, and he can't help but feel the sputtering of blood pulled fast through his veins as he considers just how easily Keith could kill him while he has him glued like this.

"You said that you wanted to join us," Keith says, "What about your family? Those kids? That woman?"

Lance bites his lip, stealing a short glance in Shiro's direction before

his eyes feel drawn back to Keith. It's hard to ignore him when he seems to command attention, when his entire being evokes a sense of importance that feels like a buzzing at the back of Lance's thoughts. He can't be entirely sure if Keith has control over this, but he's afraid to ask, afraid to break the feeling that Keith has draped over him now —the sense of being ensnared in a spider's web, the sense of overwhelming calm. He can't help but feel that it might hurt Keith's feelings if he brings attention to it as well, because he knows that Shiro is careful, and perhaps Shiro has assured him in the past that he can't make anyone do anything—which is true, too, Lance knows. By now it's an indisputable fact, but maybe knowing that he can impact the emotions of others, that he can draw their attention and make himself seem so important in their eyes, maybe it would make him feel guilty, and wonder, deep down, if perhaps Shiro, and now Lance, have only found themselves so drawn to him because he subconsciously wished for it to be so.

But that doesn't feel accurate. It doesn't fit in exactly the right way. He doesn't know how to explain how he feels now, how he can feel for Keith as he felt once for a mysterious Shiro, while separating that sensation from this attentiveness that Keith's presence forces on him. But he knows that these are separate things, that he could hate Keith even if he couldn't ignore him, that the spell being broken wouldn't alleviate his feelings, just as Keith banishing him weeks ago did nothing to quell his relentless urge to seek him out and see him again.

It's weird, to realize that he's taken so much time to ponder this and neither Keith nor Shiro are questioning him. But he accepts their understanding quiet, and he's thankful that they aren't looking at him now as though he's lost his mind. He knows that they must be expecting for him to have contemplated his answer to Keith's question instead of lamenting the strange way that Keith makes him feel, but maybe Shiro, at least, can understand it. And even if he's gotten better at compartmentalizing those emotions and the urges, and the weirdness of all of it, perhaps he can at least empathize with Lance's inexperience with it.

Lance can only hope.

But instead of dragging this out, he clears his throat. His arm bumps against Shiro's again, and he finds comfort in the prevailing warmth of Shiro's big body so close by.

"I'll figure that out. I mean… my sister keeps telling me that I need to leave home and go… see the world or whatever. And go to college

and stuff. I don't think she'd be surprised if I actually left. I—I don't know if she can handle it on her own, but… I know that she feels guilty for keeping me here. And I think—I think if maybe I could send her money and stuff, it would be okay? I mean, I know she's been trying to date and stuff. She's trying to finally… move on with her life. We've both been sort of stuck in this rut since my parents died, but… I don't know, maybe it's time to move on? Maybe… this town is bad for me. Maybe… I'd be happier if I just accepted that staying here isn't doing anything for me, but… I can't really think of anything else that would make me happy either. Except, I guess… seeing the ocean again. And being somewhere where it's actually sunny and warm. My mom always used to promise that we'd save up enough money to go to the beach again eventually, but… we never got the chance to."

Keith's expression is devoid of emotion as he listens, and Shiro's arm presses only firmer against Lance's side as he talks. Lance takes a moment to collect himself, feeling suddenly exposed as he finds himself leaning firmer against Shiro's side, bracing him for any amount of comfort that he can feel while so proverbially, emotionally naked between the two of them. He wonders if Keith can in any way sense his emotions, or the storm clouds brewing inside of him—if that could perhaps be what drew Keith to him in the first place, or if there might have been another facet of his being that Keith had found attractive for a potential… boyfriend? Servant?

He's embarrassed just thinking about it.

So he sucks in a breath, resisting the prevailing urge to keep looking at Keith and instead jerking his eyes to the obscured corners of the moon. It's stopped snowing now, and the world around them feels thick and cold and silent. It feels a little like standing on a movie set, uncanny and *almost* normal, almost right, almost like real life. But something feels off tonight, this profound quiet, the thick darkness, the absence of snow when the last few weeks have been accompanied by sheets of it without end. And the fact that he's found himself tucked between the two men who he's been tailing for weeks now. Seemingly effortlessly, seemingly out of nowhere, he's managed to finagle himself the exact situation that he's been vying for all this time.

Keith turns too, he can see him out of the corner of his eye. He wonders if Keith doesn't even like the light of the moon, if he's relieved tonight to find that it's been covered by the clouds. He wonders if Keith's interminable anguish is rooted in the fact that he can never exist in total darkness, or if there's a limit to that, a limit to

the amount of solace that he's willing to afford himself at the expense of humanity when he's existing in this quiet, motionless night.

Lance isn't sure, but he doesn't question it. He watches the moon, finds comfort in Shiro's arm now coiling itself around his own.

"I still want to be with both of you," he says, "I—I can't explain it, but… this feels like something that I'm supposed to do."

He can feel Shiro nod more than he can see it. In the dark, he spots the black outline of an owl swooping through the night.

He turns then to look at Shiro.

"How many people have you killed?"

It's totally out of nowhere, he knows. It's so random that Shiro stiffens immediately, that he chokes on whatever rebuttal springs eagerly to his lips. But Lance knows that he's allowed to ask these things tonight. He knows that it's his right, as a new recruit, to find out as much as he needs to about the two of them before he embarks on this endless, tireless journey with the two of them. And Shiro seems to realize it too, even as Keith is unmoving and unaffected by it. Shiro clears his throat uncomfortably, but he doesn't pull away. He doesn't treat Lance as though he's overstepped any boundaries, or as though any of this is too much for him to confront.

But he does seem as though he isn't entirely sure how to respond, so instead, he looks to Keith, finding nothing that he can use there, and no offer to help, before kicking a small stack of snow with the tip of his shoe.

"Well," he says, "That's a little complicated. I haven't—I haven't exactly killed anyone, but Keith's had a few accidents over the years."

Keith scoffs, smoothing the bottom corners of his shirt over the fronts of his thighs before turning his attention back to Lance.

"You think that we killed that guy who went missing here, don't you? You said something about that before. But Shiro doesn't kill anyone. And he doesn't want me killing either. That guy was already dead when Shiro dragged him home—"

"He was hit by a car," Shiro offers, and Keith nods short and slow.

"Whatever you think we are, and we do… We try to be good, okay?

Blood bags from hospitals and roadkill. People who just died. If I were allowed to kill people, why wouldn't I just do that all the time? It's not like people are that hard to kill."

Lance feels a shiver run up his spine, but he accepts this at face value. He has a lot of trouble imagining that either of them would lie to him when they don't have a reason right now. They must realize that he was willing to come along with them when he thought that they were murderers, so admitting that they've tried their best not to hurt anyone… in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't change much for him. Or for their situation.

He clears his throat, shuffling ever-closer to Shiro, clinging to his arm.

"So why move here?" he asks. "I mean, the hospital is so small, and… It's not like people are dying here left and right. Is that why you're so hungry all the time?"

Shiro seems uncomfortable now. He breathes in deeply, lacing his fingers with Lance's as Keith stares him down. It's not an angry look, Lance notices, but Keith seems to be gauging his reaction, seems to be waiting patiently for what he chooses to say.

"I dragged us here," Shiro says slowly, "I thought that it might be less dangerous than living in the city, with fewer people around to discover Keith, or to get in the way or get hurt, but… It's my fault. I didn't think it through—"

"I hurt someone," Keith interrupts, his eyes hard, but unwavering as they continue to stare Shiro down, "Shiro wants to blame himself, but I attacked someone when I got hungry. The police started poking around in our apartment complex, so we had to travel further away than usual. It's my fault, but Shiro always wants to blame himself."

Shiro shakes his head, pulling away from Lance only to pat his pockets in search of his cigarettes.

"Regardless," Shiro says then, winded as he procures his cigarettes and lighter from his breast pocket and proceeds to light one between his lips, "It wasn't the greatest idea to come here. The police have been investigating that disappearance too. And the dead animals, the street lamps… We're not going to be able to stay here for very much longer. Usually, we can at least stick around to see through our lease, but… I think we should keep heading west. Maybe stop in the cities around California, or Vegas—"

Keith wrinkles his nose distastefully.

“Alcoholic blood tastes terrible.”

Shiro spits a laugh.

“Then maybe that will be your incentive not to attack anyone.”

Keith’s thick brows furrow and he darts his head away sourly. Lance feels the spell that’s been placed over him abruptly broken, and he can’t help but offer a small laugh as Shiro’s lips curl up in a smile around the filter of his cigarette.

“Vegas is warm,” he offers, “And we could go to the beach sometimes, right?”

Shiro’s grin softens and his eyes are gentle when they turn back to Lance.
“I think that would be fun, of course. Keith won’t admit it, but I think he liked the beaches when we lived in Florida.”

Keith isn’t looking at them now, and he refuses to respond. He’s skimming his eyes through the trees now, as though he’s spotted something that he’s having a hard time not darting into the woods to hunt down. Lance is reminded, once again, of Shiro’s earlier comment about the apartment complex being too loud. He knows that sometimes he’s kept up in the night by the sound of neighbors fighting, or watching TV at too high of a volume. He knows that often he’s distracted by the sound of the animals in the walls scratching and digging through the nests that they’ve built there.

He wonders how it might feel if that were amplified. How it would be, to exist in a world where every breath and heartbeat was so deafening that he could never escape the sound. He wonders how it would feel to never see the sun or to feel cold or warmth. And he reaches out slowly, unthinking, grasping Shiro’s wrist with one hand, and scooping up Keith’s with the other.

He feels no fear now, has no regard for his own mortality. He doesn’t lament how easily Keith might be able to hurt him or ponder if all of this could possibly be a trick by the two of them simply to seduce him to his own death.

But Keith looks at him with those wide, dark eyes. He looks just as vulnerable and confused and curious as he had last night.

And Lance tells him, slowly, softly, heart thrumming in a way that must be oh-so thunderous in Keith's sensitive ears, "I'm going to do whatever it takes. No matter what happens, I—I'm here, and… I'm never going to regret that."

Keith doesn't have the ability to blush, Lance knows. He isn't capable of bringing color or warmth to his long-dead cheeks. But something about his expression, about the tug of his lips, the lift of his brows, the way that his eyes dart away and his muscles stiffen, and he moves as though to throw Lance's hand from his arm, but he can't quite bring himself to do it—

He's embarrassed now, completely caught off-guard.

When his niece would read to him from her monster book, Lance had never believed that he could find something as terrifying and otherworldly as a vampire to be adorable, but…

For better or worse, this new life that he's chosen for himself has a way of always surprising him.

Chapter 13

Lance draws in a slow, tired breath, fiddling with the buttons of his work shirt that just doesn't feel quite right against his skin after he's just spent a few glorious days away from the brightly-lit hellscape that is the convenience store. His uniform feels too heavy and constraining now, he feels as though he's grown far too big and far too enlightened for the regular day-to-day that had become so commonplace for the "old" Lance.

It's strange, listening to the outdated music over scratchy speakers, to Hunk as he converses easily with a customer over the counter and neglects to clean out of the nacho cheese machine as he'd promised that he would nearly an hour ago. It's surreal, existing in this buzzing, too-bright, too small space. His thoughts crawl around in the back of his head like hundreds of hungry spiders, nagging at him incessantly as he empties the trash cans beneath the drink station into a bigger bag that he'll soon drag out back to the dumpsters.

He hadn't known exactly how to respond when Hunk had asked him if he'd had a good Christmas. He'd laughed instead, awkwardly and breathy and just about as suspicious as a person possibly could be in his situation, before he'd managed to rein in his surprise and actually answer the question like a normal human being who definitely hadn't spent the better amount of his vacation fawning over two immortal pretty boys.

"Yeah, it was fine," he'd spoken with a whole lot of false confidence that he'd been certain that Hunk had immediately picked up on, "Pretty uneventful, honestly. Nothing interesting happened *at* all, gotta say. Totally… boring. Uneventful, you know? Ha, just… same old. B—but the kids liked their gifts, which was the only thing, I guess, so..."

Hunk had raised his half-melted slushie as though in a toast.

"That's all that matters, man. Christmas isn't really for us anymore, is it? It's weird getting old."

Lance had scratched uncomfortably at the back of his neck. He'd thought about choosing a path for himself where he never grew older than this. He'd thought about the possibility of never seeing Hunk again, but knowing, someday, that Hunk would grow old and die without him. It had been an uncomfortably heavy realization that had

lodged itself like a dumbbell in Lance's gut. He'd rattled off a thoughtless excuse to get himself out of that situation, if only so he could alleviate some of his own anxiety, but he still hasn't been able to shake it. He knows that if Shiro or Keith were here, it would be harder to crack his resolve, but he also knows that Shiro, by now, should be at work, and Keith has probably just woken up. The idea of Keith even considering wandering into this convenience store to visit Lance is laughably ludicrous.

He can't even imagine how Keith might look bathed in the garish glow of the fluorescent lights overhead. How he might seem out of place with his dirty feet tracking unfrozen snow through the automatic doors, over the flattened welcome mat and onto the eclectically-colored tiles that Hunk just finished mopping before Lance clocked in. How maybe he would peruse the various shelves with those long fingers knocking about the labels, taking in the colors that might look more appealing and vivid to his hyper-vigilant senses, but wholly disinterested in any snack here that doesn't still have a pulse. Lance isn't even sure if Hunk could see him if Keith were standing even just a few feet away, out in the open, or if perhaps Keith could wander about Lance's workspace unnoticed unless Lance himself decided to draw attention to him.

And even then, Lance doesn't know how it works. He doesn't know if there's a point at which a person can no longer ignore Keith, or if Keith could knock over a few shelves and unturn the filthy mop bucket by the employee entrance and poor Hunk would be completely helpless to fathom what had happened.

This thought entertains him for quite some time. He carries it with him, mulling over all of the opportunities that could potentially arise given Keith's unique skill set, even as he drags the overstuffed and slowly leaking trash bag outside to the dumpster. He barely registers the rotten stink of the garbage left untouched inside, barely worries about the fact that he's already freezing without his coat. Guiltily, his mind prods the opportunity to do something far more inappropriate—a new thought for both Shiro and Keith, who have so far been nothing but enigmatic and distant, ethereal figures in his imagination. He wonders if Shiro has ever taken advantage of Keith's invisibility to the unknowing human eye, but then he considers that Shiro himself would still be exposed, which leads him down an entirely different thought process that frankly leaves him feeling overheated even in negative temperatures.

He figures that Hunk can handle the convenience store for a moment

while he calms himself down, but his brain does him no favors. He's caught in a particularly interesting imagining of how Shiro might look dressed in only Keith's usual oversized t-shirt when he hears the bells around the other side of the store jingle as someone steps through the entrance.

With a shallow sigh, he resigns himself to being distracted instead by customers. On the off-chance that Hunk has finally decided to clean the nacho cheese machine, he doesn't want to inconvenience him by forcing him to take a customer while he's wrist-deep in crusty, day-old cheese. Lance knows how it feels to be interrupted while he's trying to clean something so delicate and messy—like being walked in on with his pants down, almost—and he definitely doesn't want to get under Hunk's skin during the beginning hours of their first shift together after the holidays. The new year is only four days away, and he'd rather welcome this fresh start with more friends than he ended the last year with. If he can help it, and if he can finally force himself to stop getting distracted by very tempting mental pictures of both Shiro and Keith in various states of undress, maybe he can make that a reality.

He pulls open the back door, thinking one final thought about this very important mental matter, wondering, just a little embarrassed by it, how normal it is to immediately begin fantasizing about monsters the moment that one learns that they really exist. Neither Shiro nor Keith are human, not entirely, and he doesn't know what it says about him that this particular fact only makes them more attractive in his mind. It's not like he can actually get a solid answer by searching "Is it okay to want to do filthy things to monsters?" on the internet, and he definitely doesn't know anyone that he can ask who won't look at him as though he's gone insane. He resigns himself to the lonely realization that this is surely one thing that he must go alone, but maybe, over time, when he feels more comfortable around both of them, he can pull Shiro aside and ask him how long it took for him after meeting Keith to start thinking about him in less socially acceptable ways.

When he steps into the store again, it feels too warm. Hunk, as he expected, is telling a lady at the counter that he'll be with her in a moment, from the general direction of the nacho cheese machine, but Lance is quick to cut him off.

"I got it, man, you keep working!" He smiles then at the woman at the counter, straightening his sorry posture and before offering her a small wave. "Sorry about that, I can ring you out now. How are you doing

today?"

The woman doesn't say anything right away. She's a stern-faced woman that he remembers from fleeting visits before. More times than not, she doesn't like to make conversation, but she's been known to be rude to other cashiers, while she's always been begrudgingly polite to him. It's curious, but Lance prefers not to question it. He likes to think that he has a charming way with people, that even with a professional hard-ass like this woman—with her short and faded hair, the deep indents of frown lines framing her thin and tightly-pulled lips—he might be able to make a decent enough impression with his general friendliness that they don't leave in quite as bad of a mood as before.

He knows that quite a lot of the elders in this town treat him with a gentleness that they rarely afford his co-workers, like Hunk. He boasts privately that he's just that sweet to them, just so kind-hearted and vivaciously youthful that being rude to him would be akin to kicking an innocent puppy. Hunk never seems completely convinced, but he does allow Lance to claim this victory time and time again. And it's the best reason that Lance can think of anyway, as to why a woman like this would never raise her voice to him or call him an idiot when she clearly has no reservations when it comes to doing the same thing to anyone else.

Tonight, she seems to be in a worse mood than usual, and Lance forces himself to drag his thoughts away from the lingering images of Keith and Shiro from his fantasies earlier, if only to spare himself from messing up and inviting her potential wrath.

She's left a small variety of random odds and ends on the counter between them. Lance reaches first for a lighter with the warped image of a burning skull printed over the surface. He asks her if she's interested in buying any tobacco, and she gives him an extended, hard look before turning him down. He nods then, feeling suddenly put on the spot as he asks then if she wants a bag. She does, a small one, for everything but the diet soda in her pile. She watches him like a hawk as he places the lighter, then a rubbery, bear-shaped keychain into her bag. Next goes the soda, which he slides back where it was, but when he reaches for the final item—a portable power source—suddenly, her small hand darts forward and her long, thin fingers wrap around his wrist. Her grip isn't tight enough that he couldn't break it, but it's firm in a way that stops him immediately. He's experienced a few people in the past swatting at him for various reasons at this job, and a few angry customers have made as though to attack him, but this instance is so unexpected, so abrupt and totally out of nowhere that Lance feels

frozen in place. His wide eyes find her face, her stony expression, the firm line of her deepening frown. His lips tremble for a moment as he struggles to find the right words to say. As his brain scrambles to make sense of where this commonplace clerk-customer interaction suddenly took a turn from normal to bad.

Quietly, she speaks, and her words are so toxic, so venomous and calculated cool that for a moment, Lance considers that he might be having a particularly strange nightmare.

“You’re friends with Ryou Yamazaki, correct? You do know that he’s a monster, don’t you?”

Lance almost chokes, the air in his lungs feels so thick. He flounders for a moment, tugging weakly at the iron grip that she has around him. Her dry hands are like rope, chafing him. He can feel their wild pulses mingling where they’re connected. She doesn’t relent, doesn’t loosen her grip or make to ease away, and he wonders how much longer Hunk will need before he finishes cleaning the nacho cheese machine. He jerks his head in that general direction, his view obstructed by a cardboard cutout ad for some random new energy drink, by the shelves of various chip brands and canned dips. He sucks in another weak breath, turning his gaze back to the woman’s face, then her fingers, before putting on his most confident and convincing smile.

“I-I’m sorry, ma’am, I don’t know what you mean.”

His voice is squeaky and stilted. He sounds as though he might have regressed a few years back to early puberty. The woman raises a single, silvery brow, her fingers threading only tighter around his wrist, constricting him like a python squeezing the air from a mouse’s lungs. Lance knows that he isn’t strong like Keith and he isn’t brave like Shiro. He isn’t a snake, but a mouse, and right now, no one is here to save him. He can hear the sound of plastic rattling against the floor just over the shelves, and he knows that Hunk has bumped the cover of the cheese machine and sent it skittering across the floor. He yearns to break this moment under the guise of helping Hunk clean up whatever mess that must have left behind, but he hasn’t finished this transaction. This woman has caught him in the most vulnerable way, at the most precarious time, and he doesn’t even know if he could find the right words to tell her, if only to escape before this goes from bad to even worse.

“I think you *do* know,” she tells him, no room in her firm, demanding

tone for questions or disagreements, “You need to be careful around that man. You’re a good kid, Lance McClain. Keep your nose clean. Don’t get wrapped up in whatever sick game that man is playing here.”

And as though none of this ever happened, as though Lance might have truly conjured all of this up in his imagination, she pulls away. She tugs her wallet from the bag hanging from her shoulder, raising her eyes to him slowly and staring at him in a pointed, impatient way before saying, “Can I have my total? I don’t have all day.”

He swallows hard, shaking his head quickly back and forth as though to clear his thoughts, still suspended evenly between disbelief and total mortification—still torn between the two very real possibilities that he might have imagined this, or that this woman really does have a very solid, albeit misguided idea of what’s going on with Shiro.

His hands shake desperately as he pulls the tag taught from the charger and scans it, nearly missing as he drops it into the bag. The cord dangles out of the side, and his trembling hands try three times before he manages to get the entire thing inside. He stumbles over her total, not even counting the change that he hands it back to her. She practically tears the bag from his hands when he offers it meekly to her, but she seems to have completely moved on from their conversation just seconds ago.

And when he finds the voice to tell her to have a good night, she’s already halfway through the door.

Officer Sendak swirls the remaining drink around in the bottom of his glass. His eyes skim the crowded interior of the tavern in which he currently sits, his long, thick legs tucked between the stool where he’s settled himself and the bar where he rests his elbows and his drink. It’s low-lit in here and orange-hued. He’s taking in the way that the stained-glass style lampshades over each of the overhanging bulbs cast a strange glow over the bodies moving around pool tables and settling over greasy food at scattered tables. On a small stage, just a short distance behind him, there’s a drunken woman slurring her way through a karaoke pop song that he doesn’t recognize. This place smells of stale cigarettes and fried food. There’s an ever-present cloud of smoke hanging low in the air.

And Sendak finds himself in a stilted, half-drunken stupor here three times a week. His job as an officer in this small town is nothing close to demanding, but it's the monotony that settles itself like molasses in the marrow of his bones. It's the endless drone of his ordinary routine that drives him to find solace in the bottle more often than he can find the strength to drag himself home at night.

He'd told one of the detectives working that missing person case before, "The stiff probably just skipped town. I don't know why I haven't done the same."

She'd been a strangely eager and punctual woman given the amount of time that she'd been employed here. Many of the cops were well-known boozers and depressives. Many of them created chaos in their personal lives to remedy to impending boredom of their line of work. And maybe catching an abusive lover from time to time, or a man who hurts his children, or a woman who revenge-murders a neighbor's pet—maybe that would break up the terrible silence, if it weren't so neatly swept under the rug. Finding cops to employ here has always been difficult. Sendak knows that most bright-eyed newbies aren't going into this line of work for the job security or the endless serenity. Offering them nothing but a stray speeding ticket or a curfew violation from time to time isn't the most enticing offer that he can imagine.

The young grow up and move away for better things. The old grow only older and make room for more emptiness. Sendak isn't sure how much longer life in this town might be sustainable. He doesn't know if they'll find themselves consumed completely by the darkness that's slowly taken hold of their whole town. But he can understand how someone like that plucky Detective Sanda—that's her name, yeah—might throw themselves into the first interesting case that they can get their mitts on. Sendak has to admit that he'd carried his own conspiracy theories about that car wreck a few years back, allowing himself to be drawn into an enticing narrative of the could-bes and maybes that had been just as consuming as they were, inevitably, unhealthy and incorrect. He'd been positive that foul play was involved somehow, even when all of the evidence pointed to something else, something more tragic but ultimately innocent. It was an accident, but for a while, it was entertaining to dream. To be consumed by the morbid ideation that perhaps anything interesting or complex could happen in a place like this. A family didn't just hydroplane on black ice and go veering over a shoddy guardrail that had been in dire need of repairs for decades at that point. Four children, one still a young kid at the time, weren't left orphaned just

because God intended it, or because accidents happen, because terrible things happen at the worst times, and they'd just drawn a losing hand.

In the end, Sendak had come to his senses and dropped it, but when he'd allowed himself to ruminate in the possibilities of a real crime, he can't deny that he'd felt alive. And he can't forget how rarely he'd found himself drinking then—as though all that he'd needed to kick one addiction was latching himself onto a new obsession. As though his mental health had relied entirely too intrinsically on the tragedy that had struck those poor kids, who he'd never gotten around to interviewing himself.

Veronica McClain, the oldest remaining of the children left in this town, works as a receptionist at Dr. Smyth's office just up the road from here. Sendak had thankfully stopped himself from making an appointment there just to hear the voice of a local celebrity, even years later. It's uncomely to gawk at the tragedy machines, he knows, to treat them as the sideshow attractions that other citizens in this town will never stop considering them to be. Ms. McClain and her gaggle of fatherless bastard children are just as much revered here as they're made pariahs. The old hens will ask her how she's feeling in those sweet, soft voices, but the clucking and jeering and the gossip will resume, like clockwork, the moment that she walks away.

Sendak knows this for certain, he's done it himself, too, before.

He finds that even now it's difficult to feel sympathy for people who he's so decidedly disconnected from. Veronica, her children, and that wiry little waif of a brother of hers—they're more of what happened to them than people, in Sendak's eyes. They're a stark example of what he could have been under better circumstances—of his own failure to conjure the reality of a real crime from something innocuous. He knows that Veronica called his office quite a few times in her younger years to complain about the anonymous phone calls that she's surely still receiving to this day about her parents' deaths.

"Your mom and dad died because you're sinners."

"God is punishing you now just as he punished your parents."

"If you don't repent, he's going to damn you too."

He can't even bring himself to feel guilty about his hesitancy to act on her complaints. They don't seem to understand that their role now is to be gawked at, to entertain the world with their sadness. This town

hasn't known a tragedy since then, and the locals are growing restless. Ms. McClain was foolish enough to believe that she and her family could live a normal life, to move on in a place that's stunted in that last substantial piece of news. And that's on her, for hoping, he tells himself. It's her fault for ever expecting more from the human predisposition to be ugly and to seek out the morbidity of the universe and to martyr those who have been marked with the black brand of sadness instead of ever allowing them to grow bigger than their own tragedy.

He takes another slow sip of his drink, tipping his head back and allowing the muscles in his face to smooth out. He thinks that if they really did want so desperately to move on from this, if they didn't enjoy the attention even a small amount, they would have moved away. They would have cut the ties that bound them here and started over in a new place, where no one knew their names.

The lilting babbling of the drunk woman on the stage ebbs off, and no one takes her place after she presumably stumbles back to her table. After a moment, the music overhead begins droning on again, on a timer set to only stop if someone activates the karaoke machine. Sendak revels in the peace, finally, easily able to ignore the more in-tune voices buzzing over aged speakers than he's ever managed to tune out the obnoxious try-hards who decide to belt out their half-baked, half-remembered lyrics and tunes on the stage. He knows damn well that the karaoke machine itself has been broken for years now. The lyrics lurch entirely too slowly to keep up with any of the songs. It's as depressing as it is annoying, and he's never managed to figure out if he'd rather pity the sorry suckers who think that anyone here actually wants to hear them sing, or just hate them for polluting his eardrums with their drivel.

He imagines that a place like this might be more hip in the city, where drunken college girls might flock here to screech their favorites tunes on the stage, where younger men might occupy the corners with their buddies, searching through myriad of slack-jawed, painted-on feminine faces in search of the right girl to buy a drink. Here, in this small, aging place, it's just abysmal. In this almost-ghost town, finding a smile that doesn't immediately make him want to ruin someone else's good day is a novelty that he rarely experiences.

Sendak finds that he despises most of the people here for being so boring. The select few—like the McClain tragedy machines or the curiously enthusiastic Detective Sanda—are few and far between, and even then, he prefers to study people like that from afar, over actually

getting to know them as people, and seeing what might make them tick. He wouldn't care to know how that chicken-boned little snot-nosed McClain boy is doing these days. He doesn't give a damn if he's grown up fully-functional and frightfully well-adjusted all things considered. He doesn't care about what's made Sanda lose her shit so impressively, and what might compel any of those people to do anything that they do. They're interesting, but not enough so that he gives a damn about their lives.

It's so rare to find even a single person in this town worth his time that Sendak gave up trying years ago. It's easier to drag himself through the achingly boring days and lonely nights without connections. It's simpler if he just admits to himself that another person would need to be substantially amazing to ever even have a hope of being a blip on his radar.

And it's this fact that makes the seat next to him scraping against the unpolished floor all the more surprising—when he spares a quick glance to his left and notes the handsome face that offers him nothing but a small, tired smile before its owner shuffles onto the barstool and pulls themselves closer to the bar.

Sendak recognizes him almost immediately as the sorry sucker who Sanda can't stop blabbering about. That new guy, Ryou *something* , Sendak can't remember anymore. He doesn't even care enough to try. He's seen blurry photographs of him snapped with Sanda's flip phone, printed out at the Kinkos just outside of town and tacked up proudly on that ridiculous cork board that she keeps in her office. The photos truly don't do him justice, Sendak decides. His hair catches and holds the orange swatches of the lampshades in a way that's reminiscent of the dying light of a sunset. His skin is so smooth and white that it looks like untouched snow. His dark eyes are soft, too, in a way that Sendak hasn't witnessed in a long time. His voice is gentle and even and polite as he asks the bartender for a drink—a Screwdriver, hard liquor, just Sendak's kind of guy.

Sendak finds himself watching this stranger in the same way that a wolf might watch a doe. He takes in the hard line of his jaw leading downward into the collar of his coat. The legs of his pants are soft and light—dark purple scrubs that remind Sendak of Detective Sanda's long-winded speeches about how some missing person over thirty years ago was also a doctor, or a nurse, or some inane bullshit that had sounded so crazy coming out of her mouth that she'd made him, during his McClain conspiracy phase, seem sane.

But Ryou is handsome, and there's something about him that feels different than the normal, soulless zombies of this town. He can't blame Sanda for wanting to focus her attention on a man like this—a man who smiles so softly at the bartender as he slides his money across the counter, telling the guy to keep the change. A guy who's tall enough to dwarf the barstools that many other patron's legs dangle from. A man whose big hand wraps around the thin glass that he's been given, taking a few testing sips without even the customary grimace that Sendak is so used to witnessing when other men first try their chosen drinks in this bar. He knows that the bartender here uses cheap alcohol and that he mixes them with a lot more emphasis on the booze than the dressings. But Ryou takes these things in stride anyway. He barely reacts to the taste, to the burn that Sendak knows must be humming down his throat.

Ryou seems like a real man's man, like an interesting occurrence that might break up the monotony of this night and this life in this tedious Hellhole that he calls home. He's seldom interested in the people around him and their pitiful little private lives—and if he's honest, he doesn't give a damn about Ryou's either. He doesn't care if there's a sad sob story behind that missing arm or the scar across his nose. He doesn't give a damn about the way that Ryou is so careful to tuck his sleeves over his wrists as though he has anything to hide there. He doesn't care if Ryou is coming here tonight to drown some holiday sorrows, if his wife left him or his dog died, or if there's some deeper meaning to today's date that might account for the distant sadness that he can feel emanating from Ryou's general aura. He doesn't care what someone like Ryou thinks or what he feels. He doesn't care if he came here for a fresh start, or if he really might be on the run from the law as that whack-job Sanda thinks that he is.

But he *is* interested in that smooth, white skin, and that tender, careful smile. He wonders how a man like Ryou might look naked and bent inward with his ankles pressed up to his shoulders. He wonders if that pretty face might look even more gorgeous while warped in an expression of pleasure-dipped in pain.

He finds that doing terrible things to this prim and pristine person has suddenly replaced any need that he might have to see his drunkenness through to completion tonight. He wants to know where else a man like Ryou might have scars. He wants to see which clear patches of skin he might be able to leave new ones on. He wants to understand what sorts of ugly and beautiful disfigurements Ryou might be hiding under those silly scrubs and the oversized coat that he still hasn't shrugged off.

And so he slides his hand closer to Ryou, tipping his head inward towards the bar. He smiles, all teeth, his wolfish fangs hidden discreetly behind the smile of a lamb, of an innocent townsperson, of someone void of the ulterior motives that he knows a man like Ryou surely isn't damaged enough to ever understand.

Ryou jerks a little in surprise before turning those pretty dark eyes up at him. His mouth is pulled in a confused and lopsided smile. His lips crack open as though he's about to ask if everything is okay.

"The next round is on me," Sendak tells him airily, "You're new here, correct? Consider it a welcoming present."

Ryou flushes ever-so-slightly, the most comely shade of pink that Sendak has seen in a while. He can't help but linger on the idea of Ryou's blood under his skin, the way that it's pumping quicker through his veins now, as his heart patters, as he hesitates before nodding once, slow and even and silent, before swirling the drink around in his glass. Sendak can imagine each of his muscles moving like a well-oiled machine. He's a toy so pretty that a man can't help but wonder how it might feel to peel him apart. To shed that outer skin and prod his fingers over everything that lies beneath. Sometimes, in the quiet, guilty loneliness of his own dark and empty apartment, Sendak considers that perhaps what's missing in his life is feeling as though he has control over anything, even if it's something as sinister as this dicey game of cat and mouse.

Ryou is beautiful and he's shy as he asks how long Sendak has lived in this town. He feigns the right level of interest when Sendak tells him that he grew up here. His fingers draw over the rim of his glass, his gaze darts from Sendak's face to the black windows, to the stained glass lampshades, to the glossy but scuffed up surface of the bar on which they lean, before those soft eyes find his face again.

"It's nice here," Ryou tells him then, "Quiet, peaceful, right? This town is like something out of a Christmas card."

Sendak scoffs a laugh, taking one last swig of his drink. The whiskey tingles as it slides down his throat, and his vision blurs, just a little, diluting the crisp image of Ryou's pretty face in the same way that rain might blur the road through his windshield. For a moment, instead of imagining Ryou as just a man who happens to be very attractive and kind and oh-so trusting, he thinks of him as an angel fallen from heaven into this ever-present Hell. It's suitable, anyway, with the way that the lights glow in the subtle shades of his silvery

hair, how his eyes sparkle and his smile bends strangely at the edges, as though he isn't entirely sure how to do so naturally. Ryou takes another drink, seeming uncomfortable under Sendak's scrutinizing gaze, and Sendak knows that he might lose his hold on this man if he doesn't stop marveling at him as though he's a specimen instead of a person, or an angel instead of a human—anything but a tired man surely just clocked out from his night shift, seeking comfort in the faux company that he can find in this lowly bar over his own empty apartment.

"Is that why you moved here?" Sendak asks if only to fill the silence, if only to make himself appear to care and to be far more amiable than he's planning to be later on. "You wanted to live in the kind of town that they put on Christmas cards?"

Ryou laughs, and it's quiet and breathy, exhausted. His lips pull up ever-slighter, his eyes narrow as he takes another drink. He's downing his glass faster than he should, Sendak knows. He wonders if a person like Ryou has anything that he might want to forget, anything that he might be hiding from with the help of a drink, and this bar, and the company of another seemingly lonely human.

He wonders if anyone would miss a person like Ryou if he disappeared. At least, he thinks, for one night.

"I just needed a change of scenery," Ryou tells him, breaking up the quiet and pausing Sendak's train of thought just before it delves ever-darker, "I'm used to living in the city. I grew up in the city, moved around to *different* cities. But sometimes you just need for things to be quiet, and they can't be when people are practically living on top of each other. You can't ever be alone with your thoughts in places like that, it's never peaceful. But here—in this town… sometimes I walk outside and there's nothing but me. It's lonely, but… it's quiet."

Sendak nods as though he understands. He feigns some level of camaraderie with Ryou, even though the quiet of this town has never felt like anything but an oppressive weight, a heavy noose slowly growing tighter and tighter around his throat.

"It's definitely quiet, you've got that right."

It's all that he can offer in response, but Ryou seems to ignore or perhaps even completely miss the obvious venom in those words because he doesn't frown, doesn't twitch or ask why any mention of this town seems to have soured Sendak's mood. He takes another

drink, and Sendak notices that he's finished it. He'll be drunk quicker if he doesn't slow down. It would be a shame if he were to find himself incapacitated in a place like this, where he doesn't know anyone. Where he'd be so incapable of finding his way home alone. He might not even remember any of this in the morning. He might not be able to pick out a single face that he saw tonight in a line-up, even if he so desperately wanted to.

Sendak calls over the bartender to order seconds, and for a moment, he wonders how easy it would be to slip something into a glass, right in front of the drinker. He wonders if Ryou is the type of person to follow that childish superstition—to abstain from taking a trip to the bathroom while drinking, or if he'd ever have the opportunity to find himself in a position of power over a man as beautiful as this. He doesn't have any drugs on him now, but maybe later on. He knows that he could easily take a trip to the narcotics lockup at the station and no one would bat an eye. He knows that no one cares around here, he's done this sort of thing a few times before and even if anyone had noticed, they've never made a mention of it.

He doesn't know what he'd do if he did, in fact, find himself in charge of this man's fragile life. He doesn't know if he'd just watch him up close, or if he'd touch him, if he'd hurt him, if he'd find himself mad with power once he realized that Ryou surely wouldn't remember anything that he did the next morning anyway.

And he's drinking so much now, already taking a long sip of the new glass that the bartender slides over to him. Sendak nurses his instead. He wants to be coherent tonight. He wants to remember this moment as well as he can, and hopefully, later on, Ryou might decide to return here in search of him, his new bar friend, his new connection in such a small but cliquey town.

Sendak isn't interested in dating a person like Ryou. He doesn't want to know him personally. He doesn't want to own him completely.

But he wants to see as much of him as he can. He wants to touch that paper white skin and feel if it's really as soft as it looks. He wants to know how Ryou cries, how he looks in pain, confused. He wants to pick him apart and leave him to piece himself back together when he's awake enough to regret this.

He wants to understand how the first responders on the McClain car accident much have felt when taking in the wreckage. To witness something so broken beyond repair, to feel tethered then to a terrible

calamity that might still be seared into their minds to this day. He just wants to feel something, something dark and terrible which might reverberate through his long-dead insides in the way that he hasn't felt alive in many, many years. It might be like shaking ice from the limbs of a tree, like the first sun of the spring melting away the winter's snow.

And he feels that a man like Ryou, so untouched by the dark hands of this ugly place, still so bright and hopeful and so unwittingly now involved, he could be the catalyst that Sendak needs for such a change. Ryou, like a rabbit unknowing of the hawk watching it from high above, he takes another long drink, and suddenly, he slides the nearly-empty glass closer to the other end of the bar, pushing himself and his bench away from the counter.

"It was very nice meeting you, Officer," he says, his voice edged with something firm and untrusting, something suddenly so coherent that Sendak is completely thrown off by it, "But I really should be getting home. Thank you for the drink."

Sendak doesn't know when things changed, when Ryou suddenly caught wind of the thoughts still swirling around in his head. He watches Ryou leave, slack-jawed and momentarily paralyzed by his surprise. Ryou, admittedly, looks good even from behind, even leaving him in his dust after so rudely cutting their impromptu date so terribly short, but then he's overcome with a familiar anger—a feeling of being cheated out of just another story, another exciting experience, and who gave a man like Ryou the right? Who gave this stranger the authority to dangle himself so enticingly just in front of Sendak's starving lips, only to tear himself away at the last second?

He doesn't know what he's planning to do when he rises as well, when he shoves himself so violently from the bar that his stool clambers down to the floor behind him. People jerk their heads in his direction and they stare, but he doesn't mind them. He barely pays them any attention at all. Ryou has already slipped through the door, and Sendak shoves past patrons as he stalks after him. The edges of his vision are clouded and his heart hammers in his chest. This man, this lowly human, has no right to refuse him, after all that he's done for him. He doesn't know who Sendak is, what he's capable of, and if he'd just played the role that he was so clearly designated when he decided to take a seat next to him, everything could have gone a lot smoother. But he's here now, angry and flustered, burned by that quick and heartless rejection when Sendak had only been extending a hand in friendship. A man like Ryou doesn't understand what an honor it

should be to be chosen by him. He doesn't understand how special he is to have caught Sendak's attention.

And it's dark and cold when Sendak stumbles drunkenly and angrily out through the door. He can barely see his hand in front of his face, through the fog of his breath and the blackness folding over him like a sheet dropped over his head. Through the veil of shadow, he can spot movement just ahead. He can see Ryou fiddling with the dim light of a cell phone or a small pocket flashlight, and he curses the dark as much as he embraces it. He doesn't buy Sanda's nonsense, that all of this is connected to the disappearances. He knows that the electricity in this town has been shoddy for a very long time, and the glass bulbs are old, they might have exploded when shrinking and expanding many times in the fluctuating cold. But the blackness only exacerbates the feeling here, of drowning in silent dark. And in this blackness, he won't be able to see Ryou's pretty face quite as clearly when he turns around, when he yells out in surprise, when he reacts to whichever thing Sendak is about to do to him, which his wild thoughts are still skipping through rampantly as he rounds closer to him.

There a shuddering somewhere in the darkness, unrest in the cage of dead trees encasing them. He can hear Ryou fumbling with his keys against the darkened lock on his car. He's having trouble shining his light and turning the key with one hand. The trees continue to groan in the wind, and he can hear voices—quiet, whispering voices, harder to understand the more he notices them. He feels suddenly colder, suddenly overwhelmed with a sense that he's being watched from all directions, but even still, in his drunken anger, he presses on. He kicks up snow around him and stumbles in the dark, and his fists shake at his sides, only uncoiling once he gets close enough that he might be able to grab Ryou around the back of his neck, but then—

Ryou turns, just before his fingertips touch skin. His eyes are wide and he jerks backward, bumping against the door of his car, slamming it closed where he'd just managed to pry it open. The sound of it bolsters through the silent blackness. Birds in distant trees shudder through dead branches as they take flight. Somewhere, far off, a car alarm blares, and this moment is stark and loud and Sendak's heart thuds hard in his chest.

In the dark, Ryou's eyes are nothing but twin, black pools, but the fear in them is intoxicating. Sendak doesn't know, still, if he'll just scare him further, or if he'll hurt him. If he'll play this off as though he was simply stopping to ask him for his number, or if his anger will lead him into more sinister places.

But Ryou speaks before his muddy mind can figure it out, before his thoughts connect in just the right way, to show him the most preferable path to take.

Ryou looks just over his shoulder, barely paying him any mind. His lips look soft and smooth even bathed in black, and his pallid cheeks are hollowed by the dark.

“K—Keith, what— wait, wait, *Keith* !”

And in the dark, in the endless veil of night, in this empty alley where Ryou has parked his decrepit and barely functioning car, in the belly of a dying, monochrome town, Officer Sendak finds himself grabbed by hands that feel like sharply-filed icicles. In his ears, the whispers grow maddeningly loud, deafening as though he’s been shoved into the mouth of the darkness itself. There’s pain, and the warm wet of blood. And a feeling of being unraveled and tossed weightlessly about, like the McClains’ scattered bodies pulverized in that tragic car wreck. He feels the same way that a doll might feel when pulled apart at the threads. There’s a crunch, and a hot itch crawling up his spine. Sendak can’t move his arms, can’t kick his legs. The scream rising in his throat is drowned out by a thick, coppery warmth.

Officer Sendak doesn’t have a family to leave behind as pariahs. He doesn’t have young children to miss him, or a wife to mourn him, and Ryou, his only recent connection among the endless drag of monotonous day into boring, agonizing night—he watches this unfold above him, still and taking this in with a strange, disgruntled but altogether unaffected sort of calm.

Sendak can feel lips at his throat, he can feel himself cracked and bent in odd directions and unmoving, incapacitated, bleeding out like a deer struck on the side of the road, like the bodies that Sanda has tied together in this big, crazy conspiracy.

He never catches sight of the beast that’s mauled him, even as his eyes slip closed, even as his brain fires off synapses wildly in an attempt to move his shattered limbs.

But the last thing that he hears before he dies is Ryou’s breathy, exasperated sigh. The crunch of his boots in the snow as he draws nearer.

“He wasn’t going to do anything, Keith,” his voice echoes, drawing

quieter, more distant, engulfed in this endless, whispering black, “Will you help me move him into the trunk?”

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thump, thump, thump.

Night unfolded around him.

Thump, thump, thump.

There was a scraping in the walls and a conversation blurry and indecipherable in his ears and blood pumping all around him and inside of his head and scratching like many tiny, tiny hands on the inner walls of his skull. There was breath and talking and light around the corners of the windows that hummed in the back of his eyes like radio static that would never let him sleep, or think, or exist without it nagging at the edge of every feeling and musing and passing fancy that filtered through his brain.

The world was overwhelming and too much and it felt too bright. The world was too loud. And the *thump-thump-thumping* continued like a drumline, itching in his thoughts. He was covered in sensations that were too vivid and too much and it was too loud and the world needed to be darker and quieter. His belly was empty and his teeth itched and Shiro was gone somewhere for the night—at that job maybe, or out smoking with Lance—but not in the dark and too-noisy apartment. He wasn't there to quiet the ever-present whirring of a busy world. Keith could smell the sweet blood of their neighbors through the walls and he could hear the tiny pitter-pattering pulses of the rodents that lived in the vents and the dusty cracks and left dropping in the back corners of the cabinets that Shiro cleaned out every couple of weeks. He could reach through one of the metal grates and grab one faster than it could run away, but Shiro would get upset if he came home and saw the mess of splattered blood and the empty carcass and the fur and tiny bones strewn around the floor.

Shiro didn't like feeling as though he wasn't good enough to feed Keith, as though Keith might have needed to venture elsewhere and find himself a meal. He didn't like the idea that Keith would be hungry enough to hunt anything, as though he might become cocky with the knowledge that he'd murdered small animals without consequence and he couldn't tell the difference between their lives

and those of a human.

Maybe he was right to an extent. Keith liked the way that human bones snapped like large branches while animals were like little twigs. He liked the feeling of the muscle and cartilage between his teeth and how it would tear and ribbon out like the long strands of cartoony pizza cheese that he'd seen once in a movie. Human blood was sweet and it was warm and there was so much of it when the rats would drain far too soon. He didn't know how to articulate a thought like this to Shiro and how to make him understand it. He didn't know how to explain to Shiro that there were food humans and friend humans and Lance wasn't in any danger and Lance's family wasn't in any danger and that he had a system in place, for the most part, because he wasn't so dumb that he couldn't tell the difference between a good person and a bad one.

Shiro always disagreed that a life was a life and it wasn't their place to make the decision to end it. Shiro didn't understand that there shouldn't have been a difference between the corpses that they'd left littered in the long path of their 30-year journey and the billions of animals packed tight in factories to feed humans. They suffered and they bled and they inevitably died. Keith wasn't sure what the difference was between a human and a cow or a pig. They were all too fragile. They were all so stupid and none of them seemed even remotely worried about the fleeting lapses of time that they'd spend on Earth until they were gone.

Twenty years or a hundred, it all seemed entirely too brief to Keith. And if they were going to die anyway, far too soon, he didn't know why it mattered when and why it happened. He didn't know why Shiro balked at the mere suggestion of only killing elderly humans if the time mattered so much to him.

He didn't understand it, but he tried to be good.

Because Shiro was kind and he cared and he'd been human once, too, so maybe he knew what he was talking about more than Keith would ever be capable of understanding it.

But the *thump-thumping* was still too loud. And it smelled too much in there. The long fingers of light picked through the curled gaps of the adhesive on the windows. The snow outside was still and Keith couldn't hear it dropping to the ground. But he could hear the wings of birds and their heartbeats and their blood rushing through them. He could hear the distant horns of cars and the blaring beeps of a cell

phone ringing unanswered. The world had a pulse that thrummed out of sync and it was maddening. The dark and the chill of winter air and a forest devoid of human voices called out to him, and Keith pushed himself up from his flat-bellied position onto his elbows. He glared at the headlights pressing through the adhesive, waited until the cars peeled out of the complex parking lot before he pulled himself up to sit.

Thump, thump, thump.

He ran his tongue over his teeth, prodded it against his itchy fangs and dragged in a long breath. Through the gapped corners of the adhesive, he could see the lighted windows of Lance's apartment across the courtyard. Through the glass, he could see Lance's sister preparing dinner for a table full of young children. He licked his teeth again.

He could hear them breathing. He could feel their pulses in his head. Their blood smelled sweet and it would be so warm and so much. He could imagine the feeling of the ligaments stringing between his teeth. He could perfectly envision that soft skin prodded with sharp teeth and the way that the blood would bubble up from the dents like oil-struck soil.

Thump, thump, thump.

He had to get out of there. He had to go somewhere else.

He was so hungry, his teeth hurt. His stomach wrenched with emptiness. His thoughts fizzled with a thousand different noises all melding together into a single, booming, overwhelming scream.

He would rove the forests in search of anything to distract himself. He would climb branches and catch unassuming birds in his fist. He would drink from them and he would convince himself that his hunger was satiated. He would crawl to the highest point in the thick brush of trees and he'd watch a distant and dark world that he could only admire from afar. There would be people who would smell delicious and who would say things and do things that only continued to confuse him. They'd push through the night and the snow and the dark and their heartbeats would be loud but Keith wouldn't understand why they cared so much about living when someday, so, so soon, they would die. His thoughts were fast and his body was hungry and nowhere was quiet, even this small town, even the woods alive with many skittering animals that he could, at least, catch easily

and devour to his heart's content. It was good enough for a little while. It gave him the illusion of feeling full.

Shiro wouldn't be angry with him for mutilating a few robins and rabbits and stray pets. They weren't enough and the flavor and the warmth of their blood was nothing compared to humans but they were better than starving.

He didn't know when he slipped through the window of the apartment that night that he would cross paths with Shiro just before dawn.

He didn't know that he would see that man and hear his scattered pulse and taste the blood of him so delicious from a distance that in his anger and fear he wouldn't be able to resist sinking in his teeth.

Shiro wouldn't understand how a hunter could recognize another hunter. He was blind to the beauty of himself and never spared a single thought to the wiles of other men, how their eyes roved over him, how they coveted that soft skin and the firmness of his muscles and those gentle eyes and that pretty mouth and all of him around them in ways that Keith had been spending decades trying to ignore.

But the night would end in bloodshed, in a meal that filled his belly to contentment and Shiro's frustrated frown and his gentle but stilted words and the two of them shoving a limp and drained corpse into the trunk of his car.

And now Shiro tells him, from the front seat as Keith curls around himself in the back, "We'll drop him off around here."

At least it's dark here. At least it's somewhat quiet.

At least Lance isn't here to see any of this, even though someday, Keith knows, he's going to have to get used to it too.

Keith doesn't understand why humans live if they're just going to die someday anyway. He doesn't understand why they care about anything when each of them will inevitably rot in the same cold ground. But Shiro was once kind and soft and gentle and he reached out and cared in ways that no one else had ever for Keith in the long years before him. And Lance is vibrant and warm and funny, and he smells delicious but Keith has never even wanted to risk hurting him.

He might feel worse about hurting people if everyone was like Shiro and Lance.

But fortunately, the body that they drag out of the trunk, as a living human, was not.

The mountains are a thick dark outline against the deep navy of the night sky, wrapped in the soft silk of clouds and draped in powdery snow caps, distant and tall and looming over the town like a crown of black rested on its head. Shiro leans his weight against the glass casing of the telephone booth in which he's currently standing, fumbling with the receiver and the tangled cord of the phone in his hand as he slides a few quarters in the slot and tries to remember the digits that he needs to press.

In Orlando, these things had been practically phased out of existence, practically extinct to nothing but a faraway memory of a time and a place without the convenience of pocket-sized computer-phone combos. It instills a strange sense of nostalgia in him to remember that, once upon a time, this was the only way that he was able to communicate with another person. He still recalls the click of the rotary and the feeling of his finger in the circular slots of the heavy black receiver in his childhood home. He remembers faint wisps of memory of his mother, tall and daunting in one of her expensive floral-patterned dresses, curling the cord around her neatly-manicured finger as she chatted with one of his friends.

He remembers the faded corners of an old, dusty memory, of a thought he'd had as a teen sneaking around with a boyfriend behind his parents' backs. How he'd stuffed a torn-off corner of notebook paper into a bespectacled boy's backpack and waited near the telephone for hours in hopes of receiving a call.

Anymore, humans have moved beyond the anxiety of that life that he was once so familiar with. Gone away are the phone books and the directories, the operators and the novelty hotlines that he'd spent a large portion of a lonely childhood dialing from his bedroom. He can't help but wonder as he listens to the of the crackling dial tone as he waits to be connected, what sorts of things a person Lance's age might have spent the majority of his alone time doing during childhood. He recalls a hazy past of himself scouring the scorched asphalt of winding

streets and kids on stoops wandering out to join him. He remembers leading his bike to the nearest park to ride it through the neatly-mowed grass and empty jogging paths away from the danger of cars. He read a lot of books back then as well, but he can't imagine Lance curling up with one. He can't see him sitting still alone and quiet, distant from the loving smiles of his family or the commotion of a large group of adoring friends.

Lance is sad now, he knows, but he can't imagine that he's always been that way. But he's too out of touch now to conjure up an image of what a child might have done to fill their time just under two decades ago. How Lance's life might have been similar and different from his own, and how he might be able to reconnect to his own splintered humanity if he could ever have this sort of conversation with Lance.

He knows that Lance has a cell phone. He knows that once this call connects, the voice on the other line won't be answering from a landline. He's never been able to figure out those tiny things with their sensitive touch screen, and it's not safe to carry something around that could be tracked so easily anyway. His co-workers had called him "a relic" when he'd told them that he didn't have a private line, that he didn't have a phone or a computer and that frankly, he wasn't sure how to even use any of it. And he wonders at times like this how he'll feel in another hundred years when technology has moved even further beyond what he can even remember. When the world moves so far from that moment in time that he became so decidedly disconnected from it that he might not even know how to survive among the people anymore.

He knows that Keith reached that place a long time ago, long before they even met. And he imagines that this might be how getting old feels without the threat of death drawing nearer—just growing more and more out of touch. Losing sight of anything that might relate him to the humans who he spends so much time interacting with. In a hundred years, maybe all of this will be just as bewildering for him as it is for Keith. Maybe, before he knows it, time will slide through his fingers like sand slipping through the neck of an hourglass, and the two of them will spend the rest of their eternity driven mad by this feral frenzy and the unrest that's slowly fizzling louder and harder to ignore in the back of his thoughts.

But, for now, he places the receiver to his ear and listens as the dial tone rings and rings. He hopes that he's not interrupting anything. He has to stop himself as he tucks the bell between his ear and shoulder,

from wiping his dirtied hands on his clothes. They'll need to be thrown out if he does, and he can't risk anyone seeing the bloodstains if he needs to stop somewhere on the way home.

It's chilly out tonight, but it still hasn't snowed since Christmas. The sky in the early evening had been heavy with moisture, desolate gray just before the sun had sunk beyond the horizon and blackness had stained through it. He's tucked away on an empty road, far out in the country, across the street from a long-abandoned gas station just at the furthest reaches of town. They're a few miles short of the next stretch of civilization, in a dead zone devoid of any light but the flickering glow of the tiny bulb above the phone booth. He's thankful now he'd saved a few quarters when foregoing lunch today, that his shift had been busy enough that there hadn't been any opportunity to even grab something from the vending machine. He's wasting time while he waits, as he steadies the fervent pounding of adrenaline through his veins and wills himself to play it cool. As he convinces himself that they didn't just make the most dreadful mistake tonight and that the police surely won't be any the wiser once Keith finishes positioning the body in the woods.

The sun will rise in an hour or less. He can see the beginning traces of it glowing far beneath the mountains. If Keith doesn't hurry up, he might have to spend another day asleep in the trunk of Shiro's car until it's safe for him to venture out when it gets dark again. It's not his favorite place to rest, Shiro knows, but it's dangerous for him to wander outside when it's bright. And it might be the only punishment that Shiro's strong enough to offer him anyway, considering that he's still very much toeing the fence about how this entire ordeal unfolded in the first place.

He isn't sure why he'd thought that it would be a good idea to stop for a drink after work and why he chose that spot next to another man when an entire row at the bar had been available. Maybe he'd just wanted some company that wasn't so invested in the narrative that he's spent the last three decades shaping his life around. Maybe he'd just thought that it would be nice to feel normal for one night.

Keith didn't ask, so he doesn't bother trying to figure it out even for himself. It doesn't matter why he did what he did just as it doesn't matter now if that officer was a good and honest man or truly just as sinister as Keith had seemed to believe. It doesn't matter if he was a well-trained officer or if he'd left a family behind. Because he's dead now and surely ripped in many pieces, drained out and dried up to such an extent that only his dental records might be able to identify

him.

No open casket for Officer Sendak, it seems. Shiro can't help but push a dry laugh through his closed teeth. How dark. How gross. How sickening of him to even think it.

The call finally connects after four or five rings. Lance's voice jitters and cracks for a moment over the line before it clears out. There's a low humming in the background, but Shiro is relieved to hear no other voices. He checks his watch, squinting through the dark to make out the numbers.

5:43 AM. Lance should be getting off soon. He should be heading home within the next hour, and Shiro doesn't want to keep him waiting.

"H—lo? Can y— hear m—? Who is this?"

Shiro draws in a short breath.

"Lance, hey, it's Shiro. I'm sorry for calling while you're still at work, but—"

"N-no, no, it's okay! I—I mean, is everything okay? Are you alright?"

He can't stop himself from smiling. He buries his teeth into his bottom lip, tipping back his head and gazing up at the speckled sheet of dark night above him. His breath hangs in the air and the glow of the phone booth. His fingers feel numb in the cold. The mess on them dried hours ago, and how he feels only sticky and itchy and in dire need of a shower. He feels hungry and still just a little bit buzzed. His head swims with the lingering hints of vodka, his mouth tastes of orange juice. In the distance, he can hear whispering. He can hear shuddering through the trees, and a sickening cracking and tearing like the limbs of a doll being pulled violently from the sockets.

That's exactly what's going on right now, he knows, but he tries to distance himself from it. This should be normal now, but it never gets any easier. His dreams never feel lightened of every face that he's watched contorted in agony. Officer Sendak's wide eyes will burn themselves like white-hot pokers into his sleep tonight, he's already certain. The open-mouth and the white teeth stained in glossy blood, the way that he'd choked on his own insides churning up in his throat —gargling the blood and drowning alone in his own fluids—Shiro won't be able to forget him for a long time. Malicious motives or not, Shiro isn't sure if anyone deserves to die like that.

“I’m okay,” he says, cradling the phone just a little tighter between his cheek and shoulder, “Keith made a mistake earlier, so… we’re taking care of it. Have you ever met a man named Officer Sendak?”

Lance is silent for a long moment. He clears his throat and the resonant humming in the background of his call abruptly stops. Shiro thinks that he might be buffing the floors. He wonders how nice the middle school looks each morning when the first students just begin filing in. He wonders if it’s ever difficult for Lance, continuously cleaning up everyone else’s messes.

“Yeah—yeah, he’s… um. Is he dead?”

Shiro glances over the edge of the hill on which he stands into the gully just off the sidewalk. Somewhere in the thick grass and the throngs of dark trees, he can still hear that crunching and the gnawing and the whispering coming from all blind, black directions. He can still feel a shuddering of Keith’s energy close by, like dark fingers roving over his skin. The back of his skull tingles. His chest feels full. He heaves a long sigh, threading his fingers through his hair before grimacing. He’ll have to clean himself off before they leave. Keith is going to laugh at him when he sees what a mess he’s made of himself, as though Keith will have any room to talk.

“He’s… he’s dead, yeah. I’m sorry, Lance.”

He isn’t expecting the crisp bark of a laugh that crackles over the line. Lance’s voice and his breathing sound distant for a moment, as though he’s pulling his phone from his ear and switching sides. The humming resumes and Lance sounds slightly winded. Shiro wonders how heavy the buffer might be. He wonders if Lance could lift something floppier and softer, something well over 200lbs. He wonders how much easier these nights would be if they had another set of hands.

“He wasn’t very popular around town,” Lance tells him then, after a moment or so passes and Shiro finds a strange sort of calm in the continuous hum of the buffer working over the middle school floors, “There was this big thing a few years ago, uh… a few people would go into bars and stuff and they’d pass out, then they’d wake up out in the middle of nowhere without their phones or wallets or anything. It was pretty creepy. Like, they weren’t hurt, but it was like… someone drugged them just to freak them out. And then some info leaked that the police department was missing drugs, it was this whole… thing. A bunch of drama. They closed down a couple of bars for a few weeks and it stopped after that. But nothing ever happened either, no one

was arrested for it. Like, everyone kind of knew that it had to be a cop and it was probably that creep Sendak, but… of course the police department wasn't going to do anything about it. They said that it was barely even a crime—they didn't have any proof that it was a crime. But Veronica used to always say that he'd do it again eventually, once everyone forgot. That he'd get worse because all of the serial killer shows that she watches always say that they start with something small and get braver or whatever. So… I mean, Keith probably did everyone a favor. Veronica is probably going to celebrate…"

Shiro huffs a laugh. He turns his eyes back to the sky, then the darkened, broken windows of the dilapidated gas station across the road. There's more shuddering off in the distance. There's a smell out here like old gasoline and marijuana. He wonders how likely it would be to run into a group of unwitting teenagers. He wonders how often kids might sneak out here to mess around.

And he wonders what he'd do if they caught him here: chatting casually on a payphone covered in someone else's blood. Waiting on a monster somewhere in the depths of the forest as it drains their victim of the last traces of his blood, tearing him apart and scattering the remains in a weak attempt to make the whole thing look like an animal attack. He can sense that Keith is almost done anyway. They won't be here for much longer. If they can leave in a few minutes, they can hopefully avoid any witnesses. He knows that Keith is full tonight, but they wouldn't be able to leave anyone behind. They wouldn't be able to return for Lance if anyone saw them.

"I guess that's good to hear," Shiro says, dry and suddenly strained, suddenly hyper-aware of the sheer amount of blood on his fingers up to his wrist, in his hair and striped along his cheek, "They're going to write about it in the papers soon. Hopefully, they'll call it an animal attack, but… there's a chance that someone might start asking questions."

The machine stops again, and for a long moment, Lance doesn't say anything. Shiro can hear the cracking of twigs and the swaying of branches drawing nearer. It's hard to stop himself from peering around the phone booth once again just to catch sight of Keith's pale skin against the dark of the night. He knows that Keith will be somehow even more beautiful when he returns. He knows that Keith's fed so well lately that he'll be in peak physical condition. But he doesn't want to think about the positives of tonight when a man is dead. When Lance is clearly bothered by something. When this was a bad move, no doubt about it, and it's only rushed their impending

need to skip town even further along than it was before.

He knows that Lance isn't quite ready yet. His heart aches at the mere suggestion of leaving him behind.

"Lance, are you—"

"I—I'm fine. It's… it's probably nothing. This lady just came into my work tonight and she said some stuff to me, but… Don't worry about it."

He laughs then, empty and echoed with a worry that pangs deep inside of Shiro's heart.

"Where are you right now, anyway? You're calling from a payphone, right? Where in the world did you even *find* one of those?"

Shiro wants to smile and to laugh and to joke, but he feels unsettled now. He feels as though he should press on and ask Lance what happened, but he isn't sure if it's his place to do so or not. If it's better to just let it slide and wait until Lance is ready, or if the smarter or kinder move, as his new whatever-the-hell-they-are-to-each-other, would be to address the matter at hand. If that would be the sort of thing that Lance would want him to do. If it's the sort of thing that Lance would do, as well, as a person who is clearly more emotionally intelligent than both Shiro and Keith combined.

He clears his throat instead. He decides to be the coward because it fits more comfortably. Because it's all that he's ever known.

"We're near the end of highway 34," he says simply, "I was surprised to see it too, but, you know, when I was your age—"

" *Okay* ." Lance laughs again, and this time, it's barely edged with that bubbling anxiety. It's replaced instead with a genuine amusement that Shiro hasn't heard in a very long time. "You sound like my grandpa, don't say it like that."

Shiro hasn't felt older in his life than he does at this moment, but he would like to believe that he takes it in stride. He clutches his heart in faux-hurt, as though Lance could actually see his clearly wounded stance over the phone, and he squares his shoulders, tutting softly as a grin curls up the edges of his lips.

"Excuse me, *young man* —"

“Oh my God, Shiro, *please* don’t do that. You definitely have that sexy silver fox vibe, but I do *not* wanna start thinking about you like a dad.”

Shiro cranes his neck around the phone booth once more to spot Keith drawing nearer. He had the sense to wipe some of the blood from his face, which surprises Shiro to a degree, as he’s never had the foresight to do anything similar before. He almost seems to be floating as he ascends the hill between them, and his eyes are fixed on something in the dark distance that Shiro can’t make out—an animal, most likely, whose pulse is beating wildly enough that it’s ensnared most of his attention.

Shiro offers a small wave to motion him over. Keith’s eyes slide over to him fluidly, but he doesn’t register his presence in any way other than that.

He’s close enough to touch in seconds flat, but Shiro is too familiar with the ease at which he covers these large distances to be surprised anymore. But even as Keith squints his eyes unhappily at the subtle glow of the phone booth, Shiro can’t stop himself from acting on the silly thought that blossoms in his head. He can’t help but carry out an experiment now, to see just how willing Keith might be to play along with any game that he presents if the reward is being able to talk to Lance.

“Hey, Keith’s back, do you want to talk to him?”

Lance is quiet for a moment.

“You mean… on the phone?”

Shiro breathes a laugh. Keith’s eyes widen. He looks positively bewildered, but he grasps the phone in bloody hands when Shiro presses it towards him, angling it awkwardly to his cheek in the way that Shiro motions for him to.

Shiro can hear a quiet buzzing on the line that indicates that Lance is speaking. In response, Keith is silent for a number of seconds that Shiro is sure feel entirely too long to the inexperienced Lance. But finally, after Keith seems to collect himself and grow accustomed to hearing Lance’s voice through the receiver, he offers a quiet, tense, “Yes. This is Keith.”

There’s more buzzing, and Keith holds the phone a little bit further from his ear. Shiro can tell that it’s probably a little bit too loud for his

hypersensitivity, but he motions for him to hold the mouthpiece, at least, close enough to his lips that Lance can still hear him speak.

“I won’t see you tonight,” Keith says into the receiver, “Maybe tomorrow.”

There’s more buzzing, and while Keith shows little indication of emotion, Shiro can’t help but feel that he’s suddenly become flustered.

He pauses for another long moment after Lance’s voice stills on the line.

“...Fine,” he says, “Tomorrow then.”

And slowly, he offers the phone back to Shiro with a loose grip, nearly dropping it before Shiro can grasp it completely. Lance is still talking when Shiro presses the phone to his ear, but he stops abruptly when he realizes that he’s gotten Shiro again.

“He didn’t even say goodbye!”

Shiro’s words are laced with laughter. He’s grinning wide even as Keith wanders back towards the car.

“We still haven’t quite mastered phone etiquette yet,” Shiro tells him, “Or… really any etiquette.”

Lance makes a reference to some movie about a barbarian that Shiro is only vaguely familiar with, but he seems suspiciously determined to stay tight-lipped about whatever he asked Keith to do tomorrow. Lance tells him that he’s clocking out soon, and Shiro agrees that since the sun will be up, he needs to end the call too.

Lance is sweet in his goodbyes, and Shiro is thankful for the facelessness of phone calls and Keith’s distance, if only so neither of them can see the new color risen to his cheeks. Lance tells him that he misses him. Shiro promises that they’ll meet up again soon. Shiro hangs up, pursing his lips as he realizes with much regret that he needs to clean the blood from the receiver now. He wipes it on the corner of his coat, at the inseam where it will stay hopefully undetected. He makes the short walk then from the phone booth to his car, sliding himself into the driver’s seat and starting the car. As they pull away from the shoulder onto the empty road, Keith refuses to discuss anything pertaining to Lance no matter how many times Shiro teasingly pries about their conversation.

But Keith watches the world moving outside of the window in an absent way, buzzing with an excited energy that Shiro hasn't sensed in him in a very long time.

And Shiro, too, feels happy. He can't help, despite the more reasonable part of his brain assuring him that nothing in this life could ever work out perfectly, that maybe, just this once, everything will be okay.

They lull to a stop on the shoulders of another empty stretch of road just before they enter town so that Keith can climb out of the back seat and make himself comfortable in the trunk. The sun in the distance is just beginning to skim the trees, and Shiro can tell that Keith's already uncomfortable being outside this close to the morning. The trunk isn't the most accommodating resting place, and it's still splattered with small droplets of Officer Sendak's blood that they'll need to worry about tomorrow night, but Keith doesn't complain. He slides into the back and Shiro winds around the car to grab the blanket and pillow that he keeps in the back seat just in case of events such as this.

They won't get back to the apartment complex until the sun has already risen, and once Keith is settled in, Shiro will be tasked with cleaning himself off to the best of his ability before they return to town. He has some alcohol wipes in his glove box and a change of clothes in a duffle bag that he keeps in the passenger's side seat. This isn't the first time that this has happened and it won't be the last. And he's confident, at least, that they can get through this just long enough to collect themselves before they're on the run again.

He slides the pillow under Keith's head and drapes the blanket over him, and just as he's pulling away to close the lid, Keith grasps him by the collar, tugging him forward suddenly and pressing their lips together.

Shiro's breath stalls in his throat. His heart beats wildly in his chest.

And Keith releases him, clearly as flustered as he's capable of being, and situates himself in his temporary sleeping space.

"I'll see you tonight," Keith says simply, sliding his eyes closed.

And Shiro beams, he nods. He shuts the trunk and rests his back against it, patting his coat pockets for his cigarettes and lighter.

The sky is scored with lines of orange and deep pink. The trees come

alive with awakening birds, and the songs of them mingle in the quiet cold air. The smoke from his lit cigarette fades up. He watches the dead and empty road sprung out endlessly ahead of him. He knows that somewhere out there, Lance is packing up and heading home so he can sleep until his next shift, and whatever plans he's made with Keith for after.

Shiro thinks about Christmas and Lance's family. He thinks about Lance, about the chilly soft of Keith's lips.

He thinks about the day breaking up the dark, of the night bleeding into gray skies, of the snow stilled for days now and melting gradually in the gutters of the streets.

Things are going to get better from now on. They have to.

He can feel it.

Lance feels like staring tiredly at this week's newspaper headline about the town's newest missing man is the last thing that he wants to do over his eggs and bacon this morning, but it's exactly what Veronica forces him to do against his will. She drops the paper on the table just in front of him, and he catches the dead fish-eyes of the man's monochrome photo on the front page. The sight of him makes an uncomfortable kind of anxiety roil in the pits of his belly because he knows that he has an alibi for last night, but does Shiro? Did they really manage to cover this up as well as Shiro had claimed? He feels sick with nerves even thinking about opening the paper to find out. Even without admitting to Shiro that the woman at the convenience store seemed to have some ideas about his involvement in these disappearances, this alone could go very, very wrong. If they'd left even one shred of evidence, well...

Maybe they're going to Vegas a lot sooner than he was originally anticipating.

"The police think it was a cougar," Veronica tells him eagerly, plopping down in the seat across from him with a mug of coffee in her hands, "They called my boss in to inspect the body, you know? He said that it wasn't like any animal attack that he's ever seen before. Cougars have this like… claw pattern or something, I don't know. But he said that it was weird how calculated this one seemed. It didn't

look like an animal played around with the body. Just like… it was ripped apart with some kind of *purpose* , whatever that means."

Lance gives Veronica a firm look that translates easily to "I'm eating here", but she ignores him. She takes a long sip of her coffee, humming in discontentment as she reaches over to grasp the sugar container. She pours a large amount into the mug, stirring it around with the spoon that she's kept dipped inside just in case. And after a moment, after she takes another tentative drink that seems to be more to her tastes, she leans forward to slide the newspaper closer to her and thankfully far enough away from Lance that he doesn't have to spend the rest of his meal looking at that depressing photograph. Lance relishes the absence of Officer Sendak's vacant black and white stare. His skin crawls at the mere notion of what he must have looked like when Dr. Smyth inspected him. He catches sight of the words "pulverized beyond recognition" and while he appreciates that their local paper is willing to use such colorful language, his appetite is successfully shot. Veronica doesn't seem to notice that he hasn't eaten any more of his food since she sat down. It's not abnormal for her to forget that the average person doesn't have her strong stomach, but he wishes that she'd have at least waited to have this conversation until after he'd finished the eggs that he'd cooked so perfectly just a few minutes ago.

"Dr. Smyth says that they're just going to write it off as an animal attack anyway just so people don't freak out. I mean, it's not like he has any idea what the Hell's going on either, so it's not worth getting everyone all worked up over what's probably… you know, like one of those coyote-wolf hybrids or a bear with rabies or something. But you be careful going home, okay? Why don't you ask your boyfriend to give you a ride or something? Carpooling is safe! And he's a big guy. I bet he could take on a coywolf, no problem!"

Lance snorts, ignoring the reddening of his cheeks at the mere implication that Shiro is his… well, *that* . He buries his face further down and commits to the ruse that he's at least making an attempt to eat his food. After pushing the eggs into the bacon for a moment and allowing the yolk and grease to mingle together until the entire thing is too soggy to even consider finishing, he pushes himself up, sliding his fork onto the edge of the plate and walking it over to the sink to clean up. He scrapes the leftovers into the drain, activating the garbage disposal and wondering idly as it grinds if Shiro might have gotten rid of the first body in a very similar way. And if so, why leave Sendak? Why leave more evidence than absolutely necessary, when Veronica is currently rambling about what an unlikable person Officer

Sendak was around the community and how many crimes he was suspected of by the townsfolk without ever being even questioned by his fellow policemen.

“Maybe it’s some form of karmic justice,” she laments, “No one liked him anyway. I mean, if we’re being real here, is it really that bad if you’re a serial killer who only kills other killers? Or, you know… potential killers? Should we even be looking for the person who might have done it? I say we give the guy an award. Build a statue of him or something. Looks like you couldn’t get away with drugging people forever, Mr. Sendak. So sad that you never got the chance to do worse than that.”

Lance doesn’t like how that sounds, but he can’t quite put his finger on why. He tries not to think about it, why someone might want to drug a person if not nefarious reasons, and he realizes that perhaps he’ll just never know. He wonders if a person like that is better or worse than Shiro or Keith, as Veronica seems to believe that he is, and how someone like that might have crossed paths with them in the first place. He has a feeling that Keith’s moral compass isn’t quite as unflinching and altruistic as he sometimes likes to claim, and that Keith himself is disconnected enough from the humans who share this town with him that he might not understand why something like that would make Officer Sendak a bad person, when he clearly never actually hurt anyone. Lance wonders if he’ll ever get a chance to talk over the concept of morality with Keith, if perhaps they might be able to make vigilantes out of themselves one day. And he decides that the idea of himself, Keith, and Shiro traveling around like some kind of immortal superheroes is just the thought that he needed this morning to turn his mood around.

He stops thinking about Officer Sendak and the supposed mysteries surrounding his death. He stops trying to come up with a convincing argument to quell Veronica’s nervousness pertaining to his late-night walks from the middle school back to the apartment complex without anyone to accompany him. He just thinks about all of the possibilities of what could be instead, thinks about a life that’s just at the tip of his fingers if he wants to grasp it. He wonders if they could be happy like that—living together for eternity. Fighting crime. Squashing the lives of nasty men like Sendak who only want to hurt for their own selfish gain, and not because their existence depends on it like Keith. He fantasizes about warm beaches and the bright sun, the blue skies, the endless days of summer and long nights spent scouring the cities for criminals to punish with Shiro and Keith. He imagines for a while that life could ever be so black and white, that he could ever hurt someone

without feeling bad about it. That he could somehow stay unburdened by the weight of guilt that Shiro carries on his shoulders unendingly.

It's a nice narrative to distract himself with, as he finishes the dishes and hangs them to dry on the rack. Veronica is reading through the paper when he turns around, when he wipes his hands on the towel hanging from the over the handle and checks the clock on the opposite wall. It's time to walk the kids to the bus. It's time, once again, to begin his daily routine.

He wonders how much longer this life with his family is sustainable.

He wonders how many of these normal, everyday routines he'll miss once he leaves this all behind and can never revisit them again.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you so much for sticking around for the first 100,000 words of En Memoria! And a special thanks to Mai and, of course, Epi, for making this story possible.
>
> I hope the remaining chapters of this story are enjoyable! Thanks so much, once again, for reading! <3

Chapter 15

Lance kicks the snow from the bottom of his shoes, scraping the soles against the scratchy threads of the welcome mat for good measure before he pushes through the front door and closes and locks it safely behind him. He can hear Veronica tinkering around in the kitchen as he takes a moment to slip off said shoes and place them on the rack by the door, and to shrug off his coat before hanging it from the handle of the closet just next to him.

He could use a nap. He'd only managed to sleep for a few fleeting hours before he'd needed to wake up and get the kids ready for school. He shouldn't be awake right now if he wants to be rested enough to survive his shift at the middle school, and especially if he has any hope of actually staying up long enough to make good on his promise to meet up with Keith tonight. He knows that his excitement at the mere prospect of spending more time with Keith might be enough to drag him through the day, but he isn't entirely positive just how far in life determination alone can really get him. Or if, by the time that he comes home and Keith eventually shows up, he might end up dozing off at their agreed upon meeting spot in the park and Keith might not understand that humans can actually freeze to death well enough to think to wake him.

But he assures himself that he'll sleep soon. He'll squeeze in a short nap before he has to get ready for his shift at the convenience store. He'll buy himself a nice, strong espresso once he gets to work and nurse it throughout the remainder of his night. The jittery alertness that caffeine grants him might not be optimal, but he knows that even someone like Keith sleeps, he's seen it himself. And even though Keith probably hasn't ever worked a human job a day in his life, at the very least, maybe he has experience with Shiro being tired too.

If… Shiro even *gets* tired. Lance isn't even positive that either of them sleeps for more than passing the time. He'll have to ask them later.

Veronica's shift at Dr. Smyth's office will be starting in just under an hour, and while she's already dressed in her scrubs and her hair and makeup have been put together expertly in the bathroom since he'd went outside to walk the kids to the bus, she still manages to carry herself with the ease of a person who might have the rest of the week off.

Instead of taking a nap right away, he decides to venture back into the

kitchen and talk to her before she has to leave for work. He'll still have a few hours to rest before his shift starts later tonight. And he isn't sure how long he really has left with her before he has to go away, which is a thought that still aches in his chest every time that he forces himself to think over it. He doesn't want to squander these fleeting opportunities anymore. He's committed himself to the idea of leaving all of this behind, sure, but he knows that he'll still miss his family here. He knows that someday, just as Shiro assures him, he'll look back and he'll realize that his niece should be an old woman, that Veronica and his distant sister and brothers probably aren't even alive anymore. And maybe he'll feel regretful. Maybe he'll hate that he didn't appreciate them enough before he went away.

Maybe, someday, he'll feel as sad about abandoning these people as Shiro seems to, even though the life that he lived before Keith doesn't seem to have been one that he'd enjoyed. But maybe Shiro is just sad in general. Maybe Shiro's been sad for so long that he doesn't know how to be anything else.

Maybe Lance, if he plays his cards right, won't be burdened with the regret and mourning and the crushing weight of guilt that Shiro carries on his shoulders everywhere that he goes.

And maybe, someday, Lance can help Shiro ease those feelings off as well.

But for now, in the current day and the short, passing moments of the morning, Veronica is humming and she's wiping down the counters when he slides into one of the empty seats at the table. She turns to him then, smiling at him softly as she shakes the crumbs from the rag that she's using to clean up into the sink. She pivots back around, turning the handle to rinse them down the drain.

"You look tired," she tells him, "Maybe you should consider coming home on time tonight instead of standing outside for hours in the cold with your boyfriend."

Lance coughs an uncomfortable laugh. He hates that she's put him in this position, where he can't even defend his honor and balk at the mere suggestion that he's dating Shiro because then she'd successfully catch him in that lie. He can't say that he's bothered by the concept of her thinking like that. That he could actually be good enough to be granted such a prestigious and privately coveted title. But it's still embarrassing, and he doesn't even know *what* they are yet. They haven't talked about it, have barely exchanged fleeting touches, and

they definitely haven't shared many of the unique experiences that Lance might associate with someone who he'd more comfortably call his "boyfriend". And he absolutely dreads the day when Veronica gets bold enough to make one of these snide comments when Shiro is standing close enough to hear it.

He might actually die in that event. Veronica might actually send him to his early grave.

But he lets it slide this time because that's all that he can do. He rubs a hand over his hot cheeks and turns his eyes to the orange sun filtering through the kids' fingerprints smudged on the sliding glass door. Through the piercing rays of the morning, through the dust particles sparkling in the air, he can make out the saturated outline of the building just across the courtyard—the blacked out windows, the snow capped on the roof and clinging to the rails of the balcony that he's never seen Shiro use.

He knows that Shiro, at least, is sleeping safely somewhere within those walls. He'd watched him going back to his apartment through his window just before he'd went to bed. He'd heard the resonant rumbling of Shiro's old car trudging through the snow just as the sun had risen, and he'd been curious when he'd watched Shiro, alone, venture through the courtyard and climb the stairs. He'd wondered where Keith must have been hiding, and what the two of them must have been up to for so long last night that they hadn't gotten back on time.

He understands that it has something to do with disposing of Sendak, but he doesn't know why it took so long. Or why they didn't simply destroy his remains as they'd done with many animals before, and that other man who went missing months ago, and anyone else who might have died in their paths over the last however many years. He wonders when he'll discover the reasoning behind it, if he'll ever get it entirely, or if it's perhaps just something that he'll have to get used to in time. Shiro must have a good system in place for this, since he's gone so long without ever being caught. As far as Lance knows, no one has ever convicted him of any of the murders that Keith has carried out, and no one in the past has discovered Keith's existence and lived to speak of it aside from… himself. It's a weird thought that pins the breath in his lungs. It's an odd realization that he'd be dead now if not for some mysterious aspect of himself that must have stopped Keith and Shiro from hurting him. He doesn't know why they're interested in him or how he could possibly stand apart from many other people, many better people, even, who have surely met their end after

crossing paths with Keith and Shiro in the past. He shouldn't feel special or honored or flattered even remotely when he thinks about it, but he can't stop himself.

And he decides instead, guiltily, to allow his thoughts to flitter to the very real possibility that someday, he's going to be joining both of them when they have to hide the remains of Keith's next big meal.

The thought alone of carrying a dead body is enough to make his skin crawl. He dreads the first time that he'll ever have to actually do it. He wonders if, after everything that he's done already and everything that he's already foolishly committed to seeing through, if he'll realize only when it's too late that he doesn't actually have what it takes to live the life that he so fantasizes about with Shiro and Keith.

Veronica has seemingly accepted the fact that Lance isn't going to bicker with her today, and she's instead busied herself with reorganizing the cabinets. She tidies up and Lance watches her absently, his eyes settled on her arms pulling boxes and cans from the shelves before bouncing back to the sliding door, to the apartment building with dark windows just across the courtyard. But his mind is planted firmly with Shiro and Keith in the woods last night. He thinks about how Keith had looked on Christmas Eve, how he'd collected the moonlight in smooth, ivory skin and glowed with an ethereal energy that had successfully captured Lance's attention and pinned it there for endless days. He wonders if Keith will be so beautiful when he sees him again. He wonders if he'll ever get used to witnessing Keith in such a state, watching his health deteriorate over the following weeks of fasting, how he'd fair in Shiro's shoes—feeling helpless and useless to provide for a creature that can't survive if someone else doesn't sacrifice their blood or their life.

Lance thrums his fingers against the table, tearing his eyes from Keith and Shiro's blacked out windows and drawing them slowly over the tiles on the floor, over the dented cabinets and their chipped and faded paint, to Veronica, still humming as she rearranges the shelves.

"Did you mean it before?" He asks carefully, so suddenly that Veronica twitches in mild surprise before turning herself around to look at him. "I mean… when you said that I should leave this town, would… would you really want something like that?"

Her lips are pressed firmly together for a long moment, whitened and stiff as her brows bow close inward. She sucks in a sharp breath through her nose, pushing it out long and hard and shaking her head

before dropping the can in her hand back on the surface of the counter. She wheels herself around to face him completely. She places her palms flat on the counter, propping herself up with a small hop before settling her backside on the top of it. She kicks gently, once then twice, against the counter's base behind her heels, hanging just a few inches away from the floor.

She drops her weight back, resting the back of her head against the edge of the still-ajar cabinet just behind her.

"I did mean it," she tells him, "You're obviously not happy here. I know you're always thinking about the beach and… going somewhere warmer. Mom and Dad didn't want to stay here forever either. You were pretty young when we moved, so… you probably don't remember. Dad bid on that job in California but we ended up getting placed here instead. But he always said that he'd keep trying to apply there. This was never supposed to be a permanent place for us. It's just…"

She buries her teeth into her bottom lip. She turns her eyes to the ceiling, suddenly glassy and wet at the edges.

Lance clears his throat.

"Yeah… I—I know."

Silence hangs heavily between them.

He prods out his tongue to wet his lips, his gaze easing back to the sliding glass door and peering through the sunrays to the dark silhouette of Shiro's building standing just between their window the slow-moving sun. He can see Veronica craning her neck to check the clock just out of the corner of his eye. She pushes herself off of the counter, landing on the tile with a small plop of socked feet on the floor.

"If you want to leave, you should leave," she tells him, "Mom and Dad would have wanted that for at least one of us. You're not stuck here forever just because I had kids, you know. And the kids are gonna be fine. We're all going to be fine. No one is going to be mad at you for trying to make something out of your life."

Lance doesn't react, even as he feels the weight of Veronica's hand, heavy and warm, on his shoulder as she passes by. He listens to the sound of her padding down the hall, fumbling with her boots in the foyer and collecting her things. He listens to the rattle of her keys and

the chipper way that she calls out her goodbye. His voice is weak when he calls back, telling her to be careful. He wonders how often he'll worry about her once he's gone. He wonders if he'll even be able to tell her where he is or what he's doing, or if he might disappear into the thick black of the night so seamlessly that Veronica might doubt that he ever even existed here before.

And the kids, growing up without an uncle, without a father figure, without someone to walk them to the bus when their mother works an earlier shift. He doesn't know how she can be so confident when telling him to chase his dreams when she must understand that her entire life will be uprooted in his absence. Things are hard enough as it is. They struggle each day to make ends meet.

His two jobs and his online classes. Her work at the doctor's office. School supplies, lunches, new clothes. Utilities and rent—the bills pile up. They're drowning with their heads barely submerged above the crashing waves.

Lance isn't sure if he'd be willing to grasp his own happiness at the expense of someone else's. He wonders if that makes him better or worse than someone like Keith.

And immediately, he feels guilty for even thinking about it like that, because Keith doesn't have a choice like he does. Keith didn't ask to be born as he is just as Lance would have never chosen for his parents to die when he was so young and inescapably stuck in this terrible, dark place.

But this particularly masochistic trail of thought is cut abruptly short by a hard, loud buzzing that's only exacerbated as Veronica's forgotten phone vibrates three times against the adjacent counter. He stares at it blankly for a few moments, processing the idea that she's forgotten it, wondering if it's too late to run it out to her.

And wondering, too, if he's willing to commit to walking over to Dr. Smyth's office across town, or if he can just play dumb and pretend that he didn't notice it before he went to bed.

He chooses to be nicer. He owes that to her, at least, since he's all but settled on the idea that he'll inevitably abandon her. He'll check to see if it's the Doctor, at least. He'll make sure that the messages aren't important before he relents to his own exhaustion or sacrifices his nap just to make that long walk there and back.

He rises from his seat, pausing only to slide the chair back under the

table and taking the few short steps between it and Veronica's phone. He grasps it loosely, barely thinking about his actions as he raises it to his face to check the notifications.

The name of the person that stares back at him from their three unread texts—the little blushing emoji, the smattering of hearts—he's so caught off guard by the mere concept of Veronica naming someone "Baby" in her contacts that his brain refuses to fire off any helpful synapses for a few long moments, dead and silent and frozen in place as his eyes rove blindly over the words. He remembers how to read soon after, but he regrets it just as quickly.

8:29 AM:
Good morning, sweetheart.

8:30 AM:
Did you talk to your brother this morning about us?

8:31 AM:
I have to go to work but, but I miss you. I love you.

Lance's throat feels impossibly clogged. His cheeks feel warm, his heart stutters in his chest. He imagines that this is akin to the feeling of seeing his parents kissing. He can't connect entirely to the feeling, he was too young when they died to ever form the proper level of disgust when seeing them express their love for each other.

But it's gross. It feels forbidden. Veronica hasn't been romantically interested in anyone since she met her children's' father, and even then, she'd been hours away in another town, attending school. They'd been pretty much over with by the time that she'd moved home to take care of him, and even though they'd stayed together long enough for her to have his youngest nephew just a few years later, Lance can't remember ever seeing either of them hugging or kissing or talking to each other in ways quite as intimate as these texts.

He knows that he should be happy for her, and he is, in some way. But it's buried beneath layers and layers of horror and mortification, wrapped in the regret that he feels and his sudden unrelenting urge to go to bed and pretend that this moment never happened.

He almost drops the phone at the sudden feeling that his eyes are

burning, that it's branded his hand. That this entire time that he's been beating himself up over leaving, Veronica has been sending these disgusting messages to someone who calls her "sweetheart". That she was actually going to put him through the agony of talking about this, about his own sister, *dating* ! He feels sick even considering it.

He ignores the nagging feeling that he's being a hypocrite. He focuses all of his attention on his own directionless terror and disgust. He wonders if she's told the kids yet. He wonders what kind of awful conversation is waiting for him at some point in the immediate future.

And he decides, inevitably, that these messages don't need to be responded to until Veronica returns in search of her phone at lunch. The longer that he can put this off, the better he'll feel about it. He has too much to think about right now. He's too tired. He's too inexperienced when it comes to meeting his sister's romantic interests, and he has his own growing list of secrets too.

He has so many things that he needs to figure out how to explain to her that maybe, if he gives this discovery some time to steep, he'll figure out how to weave his own confessions between it.

But as he sets the phone back on the counter and scrubs his hands over his face, as he yawns loudly and stretches and drags himself through the kitchen into the hall towards his bedroom, he can't help but feel as though a weight has been lifted from his shoulders.

Veronica is going to be okay without him.

The empty place that he'll someday leave in their lives is already starting to be filled.

He knows that Veronica wouldn't push him out just because she started seeing someone, but it's a relief to know that she won't need him so desperately. The future seems brighter now, the night less full and sinister and terrifying.

He doesn't want to hear about Veronica's new gross love affair, but he's happy for her, deep, *deep* down.

And he sleeps easier once he tucks himself into bed.

He feels rested enough when he awakens in the evening that he doesn't even have to buy himself that espresso at work.

Detective Sanda stares long and hard at the series of photos spread out neatly on her desk. The first one, from a distance, could be perceived as nothing but some kind of sloppy nature photography, the thick weeds springing up and tangling in the thorny branches of the surrounding bushes, the heavy bodies of evergreen trees pressed closely together in a dark gully at the bottom of a shallow slope from highway into forest. Aside from the yellow caution tape and the scattered place-cards strewn about the icy grass, there's something calming about this photo. Sanda is reminded suddenly of the beach in the background of Lance McClain's family picture. She thinks about how different and darker the ever-present winter is than the sandy coast of a land so far away where Lance had once roosted, happier and far more hopeful than he seems to be these days, here. She wonders, as her gaze slides from the first photo to the second, what in the world his parents could have possibly wanted that they'd thought that they'd find in a place like this.

The second photo is perhaps the most recognizable, the only one that conjures up a memory of Officer Sendak in life to be compared to the horrifying mutilated state in which he was found in death. She remembers the clubbed, fat fingers reaching out and dwarfing hers the very first time that they shook hands. She remembers those thick, wide nails manicured carefully and short. But Sendak had been clean and his nail beds had been devoid of the muck caked beneath them when they'd found him. There were marks dragged in the melted snow and mud around his body as though he'd struggled to pry himself out of that trench. But there wasn't blood, not even a speck of it. And no footprints from an animal or a human leading there or away. As though Sendak had been dropped from the sky already scattered. As though someone had been very careful to cover their tracks before they left him there to freeze.

The second photo is just of his single recovered arm, fingers curled in toward the palm, hand facing upward at the sky as though reaching up for something that Sendak had surely not been able to touch before he died. The bone has been splintered off and the muscle hangs loosely, frosted in the cold and picked at by roving scavengers before anyone had noticed the body and made the first call. It had been a jogger who found him, initially, and they'd originally just reported that someone had dumped some kind of doll. A littering complaint that no one but Sanda had taken seriously, and while her bosses had commended her for taking it seriously and leading the first team to

discover that grisly scene unfolded in the mouth of the trees, they still don't seem to understand the vast depth that a case like this suggests.

Tox reports came back and they'd found large traces of alcohol in Sendak's system. His car had been parked in front of his usual haunt—the town's single bar in the business district, collecting various red-tinted parking tickets before they'd called a tow truck to drag it to the station to be searched. They'd turned up nothing of interest from that. Sanda doesn't even bother thumbing through the search report for the time being. It's not totally unreasonable to believe that Sendak could have taken a wrong turn during a drunken walk home from the bar. The bartender had attested that he'd left in a tizzy, but he hadn't paid enough attention to what he might have been up to prior to know for sure if he'd been heading home for the night or not. He'd mentioned that Sendak seldom spoke more than he needed to during the many nights that he spent drinking himself into oblivion, that the bartender himself had such fleeting albeit unpleasant experiences with him that he was often relieved to see him leave for the night, each night, until he ventured in again the next time that he got off from work.

He had mentioned something curious, however, that had piqued Sanda's interest and revived her slowly-dwindling hope that she'd ever be offered a single tangible shred of proof to leverage her claims against Ryou Yamazaki. The bartender had mentioned in passing that Sendak had spent a short moment conversing with another man, bought him a drink and struck up a conversation. That the bartender himself had never seen that particular patron before, but he'd tipped well, he'd left quietly without a mess, he'd been polite and well behaved and he'd distracted Sendak from his "bitching", as the bartender had so eloquently phrased it.

And he was a tall, young, good-looking man. White hair, wide build. Missing his right arm. He'd been dressed in a thick, dark coat over scrubs, and he'd stayed only long enough to down two drinks. He'd slipped through the door just before Sendak had taken his abrupt and noisy leave. He'd been so quiet that the bartender hadn't overheard what their conversation was about.

But Ryou Yamazaki was clearly the last person to see Sendak alive. Indisputably, the only man in town who could perfectly match that description. Her fellow detectives had moaned and groaned when she'd brought this assertion to their boss's attention. They'd complained that she was "on again with the loony mumbo-jumbo". But it was undeniable, she'd been positive. And her boss hadn't been able to deny it either, had instructed a few other officers to pull

Yamazaki's information and tracked down where they could find him, where he lived, where they could meet him to talk if they needed to.

Hook, line, sinker. Sanda convinces herself that this minute detail, no matter how potentially mundane, might be the one tool that she needs to turn this case around for her entirely.

Her boss had approved for Ryou to be interviewed, but he'd barred her from carrying it out herself. He'd claimed that she would be biased, she clearly has too much special interest invested in this. There's no proof as of right now that foul play was involved in Sendak's death at all, and clearly, the police force doesn't believe that Ryou could actually be connected to an apparent animal attack in any shape or form. The interview had interrupted the first twenty-five minutes of Ryou's shift earlier in the evening, had spanned far too short to collect any of the information that Sanda had been praying to read. They'd recorded it and she'd had to grovel pitifully in order to get her hands on even the written transcript. They hadn't allowed her to listen to the tapes. She'd ached with the need to hear Yamazaki's sniveling voice cracking through the speakers of her computer, caught like a rat in a trap. Backed into a corner and finally held accountable for one murder in the long trail of dead bodies littering his path.

But she'll have to settle for the written word, for now. The thick, uniform text printed over the file is silent and devoid of any teary crack of Yamazaki's voice or any accusation or anger or fear. While she flips through the transcript for what must be the dozenth time since she collected it nearly two hours ago, she can't help but feel pinpricks of disgust tingling over her skin and settling as a heavy, sickening weight in the depths of her belly.

Clearly, Ryou is up to something, even though the department has all but cleared him of the crime.

The interview, typed clean and invariable, giving away not even the subtlest of hints regarding the evil that sleeps within a man like Ryou Yamazaki, feels weighted in her hands. She can't ignore the licking fires of anger that flare up in her chest when she considers all of the questions that she would have asked instead. Can't stop herself from ruminating on how the incompetence of her fellow detectives might bungle this entire slow-building case before she even amasses enough information to pursue it seriously.

But it still feels good to see Yamazaki's name printed on official police documents, still feels rewarding in some shape or form to have him

logged in their system now. She stares at the document, long and wistful, reading the words slowly, over and over again until she might be able to recite them from memory.

RYOU YAMAZAKI

PART 1/1 OF RECORDED INTERVIEW

DURATION: 25 minutes

LOCATION: 24-HOUR EMERGENCY HOSPITAL

CONDUCTED BY: DETECTIVE IVERSON AND OFFICER KINKADE

DETECTIVE IVERSON: Were you at the Lion's Head bar at approximately 3 AM to 4 AM last night?

YAMAZAKI, RYOU: I was. I stopped in for a couple of drinks. Why, did something happen?

DETECTIVE IVERSON: You're not in any trouble, Mr. Yamazaki. We just have reason to believe that you might have spoken to a man who went missing this morning.

YAMAZAKI, RYOU: Oh, well. [Yamazaki goes silent] Last night, I talked to the bartender when I ordered my drink, and... This man at the bar ordered me a drink as well. I believe he was a police officer. We talked briefly, but I couldn't stay for very long, so I left. I think I saw him leaving right before I got into my car. He was friendly, but we didn't talk very much. He seemed okay when I spoke with him.

DETECTIVE IVERSON: Could you describe what this man looked like? What he was wearing, what he said to you?

YAMAZAKI, RYOU: He was… a tall man, I believe. A little bit taller than I am. He was very stocky, muscular. He was drunk, so he was slurring quite a bit. He seemed very unhappy when I talked to him. Like he didn't like being here, in this town. He brought that up multiple times. He asked why I moved here and I told him that I enjoyed how peaceful it was, but he expressed interest in going somewhere else. He was wearing [YAMAZAKI PAUSES TO SPEAK WITH A PASSING CO-WORKER] Sorry about that, where were we?

Ah, his clothes. I think he might have been wearing his uniform under a coat. He didn't introduce himself so I didn't catch his name, but I did register that he was an officer. I'm sorry, I can't be more helpful, but I didn't interact with him for very long.

DETECTIVE IVERSON: It's okay, Mr. Yamazaki. Just to be completely sure, he wasn't acting strangely at all? He didn't say anything weird to you or do anything that might have alarmed you?

YAMAZAKI, RYOU: No, I don't think so. Like I said, we didn't talk for very long. He was very friendly, I considered giving him my number so we could meet up again [YAMAZAKI PAUSES] Sorry, I just feel bad. I should have stuck around to make sure that he got to his car okay. He was very nice to me. I really should have made sure that he was okay.

DETECTIVE IVERSON: It's not your fault, Mr. Yamazaki. You've been a great help to us. If you remember anything else, please don't hesitate to call the station. Thank you for your time.

YAMAZAKI, RYOU: Thank you, officers. Please let me know if I can assist you further.

END TRANSCRIPT PAGE 1/1

Sanda tosses the small stack of papers onto the surface of her desk, jostling the photographs and sliding them up to crash into the other various files that she's pulled, the references to the original New York murders, the printed photos of Ryou sneaking about town, and that useless search report for Sendak's empty impounded vehicle.

She scrubs her hands over her face, combing her fingers back through her hair and relishing the way that her nails drag against her scalp, working jittery waves through an oncoming headache that she's been abating by sheer power of will for hours now.

Iverson, the useless, trusting fool, had attested that Ryou seemed like a nice and honest man. He'd claimed that he was the last kind of guy that he'd ever expect to be up to no good. He'd alluded vaguely with a narrowing of his eyes that perhaps Sanda had an issue with him for differing reasons, and while she hadn't known exactly what he'd been implying, she'd felt the shame of it burning her cheeks nonetheless.

No one knows that she spoke with Lance McClain last night, she's sure of it. They'd have had her suspended if they understood that she's been investing personal time on this case, the one that they've told her many times to stop meddling with, especially when she isn't technically allowed to use the leads that she's collected or the information at her disposal from work. She's itching for the opportunity to speak with Ryou herself, to take in the deceptive, innocent smile that had so easily wooed her peers. To revel in the presence of concentrated evil and to experience what it must feel like to find herself face-to-face with a real killer. She isn't beguiled by criminals as some of her friends have been in the past. She doesn't find them more charming than she wants to catch them. Doesn't find them interesting enough to pick their brains more than she'd love to put a bullet in them.

But her fellow detectives don't share her passion. They don't understand why this case is so monumental and why it's so important to keep a close eye on Ryou. She'd asked Iverson if he'd had the foresight to take any DNA samples after the interview meeting earlier and he'd barked that condescending, terrible gruff laugh of his before waving her off.

"What, are we trying to rule him out as the cougar that killed Sendak? What exactly is the crime that we're testing for here, Detective? Is trying to get laid illegal now?"

She hadn't read the subtext in her determination to find wrongdoing or any sinister implications in Ryou's words. She hadn't even stopped to consider that perhaps Sendak really had been the one to originally strike up a conversation with Ryou, and why he'd be interested in doing so. She's admittedly never wondered about the personal lives of her peers and she definitely hasn't stopped before now, before that single, humiliating moment in which the realization that Sendak had been pursuing Yamazaki sexually had crashed down on her, to consider that perhaps Yamazaki's modus operandi might be more similar to a black widow than a cougar. Might be closer to a femme fatale than the cold-blooded slaughter that she's always envisioned in her imagination.

Iverson hadn't believed her when she'd told him that she had no idea, or, at least, he was determined to pretend that she was being purposefully obtuse about this when she'd struggled to defend herself.

But now, after storming off to her office to shirk the last of her humiliation, she can't help but wonder if Lance McClain knows what

Ryou was up to that night. She can't help but think that maybe letting slip this particularly juicy piece of information without the proper context might be just what it takes to crack him.

It makes sense, and it only strengthens her argument that Ryou would need to be manipulating Lance McClain to some degree in order to get him to play along. If they were lovers, or if Ryou had somehow seduced Lance into believing that they *could* be lovers, if Lance does everything that he asks, it would make sense that Lance would protect him. That emotional investment could be strong enough to drive a man to do terrible things, especially someone like Lance. Especially someone predisposed to a fear of losing people, someone who would want so desperately to hold tightly to any special connection that they could forge in a town so bent on alienating them.

In her messy piles of paperwork and photos, at the far corner of the desk, the final photo of Sendak's corpse peeks out at her, shining in the light of her desk lamp, bathed in the gold of it. She plucks it out from under the heavy folder on top of it, raising it closer to her eyes. It's Sendak's decapitated head, severed just above the collar bones, spilling its contents out to be frozen and branded into the hard ice of the ground, severed jugular, wide, glossy eyes, slack mouth and teeth stained in a crusted black of blood, long-since dried before they arrived to collect him.

The teeth marks at his throat are baffling. His flesh is torn in peculiar ways. It doesn't look like something that a human is capable of, she can agree with that, at least, but it's difficult to discern the nibblings of animals post-mortem from the wounds that might have initially killed him until the mortician is finished examining the body. The first medical professional that the police could find initially was a specialist in animal attacks who had told her after a few desperate, stumbling attempts to pronounce his full name, "Dr. Smyth is fine with me, miss! Coran Hieronymus Wimbleton is just what my friends call me."

She hadn't laughed at the joke. She'd already been annoyed enough by the prospect of being shoved off on the idiot small-town doctor while Iverson had been rewarded with the prestige that should have rightly been hers, that she hadn't felt guilty about the awkward silence that had stretched between them. The doctor had proceeded to occupy himself, instead, with prodding at each piece of the body, humming quietly to himself and skirting around the table to get a closer look at Sendak's scrambled, seemingly dehydrated pieces.

She'd had a harder time looking at Sendak on that table than she's had with the photos. She still isn't sure why that is, why her throat had closed and her eyes had itched, and a festering cold had risen in her chest as though she could have screamed then. She'd felt overwhelmed with anxiety and she'd been forced to tear her eyes away. Sendak was nothing but the dried out beef jerky version of a human anymore. He was cracked leather skin tearing where it wore on bone. He was pieces of a puzzle knocked about and disoriented. No one but the mortician had bothered to fit him together correctly. And the hand is still missing, even now. She can imagine that, in a version of this story where the monster doesn't exist, perhaps that limb is being digested in the belly of a cougar somewhere off in the distant black mountains.

Dr. Smyth had claimed that the teeth marks were more consistent with the puncture wounds found on rabies-infested cattle than any cougar attacks that he'd seen. Sanda herself had overseen the process, and she'd asked him what he'd meant by that. He'd laughed as he'd prodded the wounds at Sendak's throat with the tip of a long Q-tip. He'd held it close to his eyes then, his pupils amplified by the thick bifocals perched just at the tip of his wide, hooked nose.

"Say that you're a big cat and you want to eat something, like a juicy deer, for instance. Or a horse!" He'd swiveled around to face her then, holding his free hand in front of his face in a motion meant to emulate a big cat's teeth. "You'd be eating the flesh, the blood itself would be secondary, you understand? Big cats tear. They eat. But these marks on your officer—"

He'd dropped his middle two fingers down to his palm, the back of his hand still pressed against his mouth and muffling his words. His two still-lifted fingers had then been motioned as though to appear like long and narrow fangs. He'd closed them downward once, then twice. He'd kept his hand poised in front of him as he swooped back around to look again at Sendak's mangled remains.

"It's true that this body has been torn apart, but his flesh hasn't been eaten to the degree that one would expect from a big cat. And these teeth marks—there's no tearing of the flesh at the puncture. Bats, Detective, puncture. Their goal is to draw blood to feed from. Bats don't mutilate, however, and you'd be hard pressed to find a bat large enough to do this sort of damage!"

There's a thick hardback book propped against the lampshade just a few inches beyond the clutter of paperwork. It's a glossy-covered,

faded-paged and vastly outdated collection of information about bat biology. Sanda has taken to flipping through it idly when she needs to collect her thoughts. She finds it calming to look at the small black beads of those creature's eyes, the diagrams of their tiny jaws and the jagged rows of teeth that Dr. Smyth had attested to when they'd inspected Sendak's body. She'd checked the book out from the local library just after leaving his office, as her men collected Sendak's remains and shipped them off to the morgue for the mortician. She'd sat in her car just outside of the library with the weighty book in her hands. And she'd spread out Sendak's photos on the passenger's side seat, flipping through the sticky pages of the book until she'd found a diagram of different bat teeth and drawn examples of their bites. She'd compared the punctures on Sendak's throat to the tiny pinpricks in the pages.

He was right, of course. They did look very similar. She wasn't sure exactly what that meant at the time. She didn't know how it would affect her private investigation or how she'd go about presenting this new information to her bosses. Dr. Smyth had written his own report on the matter, citing a small collection of animals that he'd claimed all fed on the blood of other creatures.

Bats, ticks, fleas. Some strains of finches and other small birds. Several types of fish with hard to pronounce names. They're all too small to damage their prey in quite the state that Sendak had been left in. And most of them—she'd noted in her research with a small selection of highlighter marks over a desk-sized world map that she now keeps folded and tucked safely in the back pages of the bat book—they aren't even native to the United States, and definitely not a chilly place like this.

Not even vampire bats live this far north. Dr. Smyth had suggested in jest that perhaps they were dealing with some sort of dangerous new hybrid.

She'd told him at the time, not patient enough for his off-the-wall sense of humor and stiffening in discomfort when the older McClain sibling had suddenly poked her head into the room to inform the doctor of some appointment that he needed to attend to soon, that whatever they were dealing with was surely nothing new.

"Hybrid or not," she'd told him, "All animals have to die eventually."

The McClain girl was settled back at the front desk when Sanda took her leave. She'd told Sanda to have a nice day in a cheery voice that

didn't match the melancholy that perpetually emanated from her entire family.

She carries a sadness that even her grandchildren will inherit. She doesn't seem to know yet that her younger brother is potentially at the center of this terrible, dastardly crime.

Sanda hadn't offered any response. She hadn't had the nerve to speak to the girl considering how many long hours she's spent studying the family photos on her younger brother's inactive social media accounts. She hadn't had the heart to confront her even with kindness while she's toiling away so restlessly in the, so far, fruitless attempt to understand her brother's involvement in this violent string of murders.

Sanda has never questioned her resolve or her reasoning as intensely as she had at that moment. The McClains, she's realized, each have a way of embedding themselves like splinters just under her nail bed. They itch there, they make her feel a constant, overwhelming discontent. She likes Veronica no more or less than she likes Lance, wants for her to go away and stop infecting this town with her sadness just as desperately as she'd love to discover that Lance is at the root of this.

But Lance, as far as she knows, has an ironclad alibi for the entirety of last night. The middle school secretary had seemed uncomfortably nervous when she'd called to request that they pull his time sheet. He hadn't clocked out until nearly sunrise. He'd stayed late to buff the floors, she'd been told. And as far as she knows, Lance McClain isn't capable of biting someone and leaving those distinct marks. But maybe, if she's feeling desperate enough, she'll find a way to check his teeth next time that she stops by the convenience store.

She'd called the most popular cell phone distributor around town and requested to pull his file there, as well. She'd been told that she'd need a warrant for them to even confirm that he had an account with them. She'd marked that down as a "maybe" lead. She'd told herself that if she collected enough evidence, perhaps she could convince her boss to contact a judge and they could tackle both the McClains' and Yamazaki's phone records in one fell swoop. She feels barred off from the information that she might need to actually make a solid case for herself. She still has nothing but a gut feeling and a Rolodex of facts that won't quite string together how they need to. She knows that if she had the appropriate resources, she could make a solid case. She could find a suspicious phone call in Lance's history. She could trace a curious text conversation between him and Yamazaki. She could track

the GPS on both of their phones and see how close either of them came to passing through the abandoned strip of road where Sendak was discovered, and she knows that she'd find something.

She just needs more than what she's managed to collect.

One slip-up, she knows, that's all it will take. Lance, if he is in fact involved in this, would be the weakest link. He's had less time to prepare for this. He's been involved for a shorter amount of time.

If she keeps looking, she'll find something.

She just has to keep looking. She just has to keep waiting until he gets too cocky, too comfortable, too reckless and stupid, and then…

Finally, everything will begin to fall into place.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

A special thanks to Epi for posting this week's chapter for me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm sorry, I already talked to some officers yesterday and I told them everything that I know. What is this regarding?"

"My apologies, Mr. Yamazaki. This is just a simple follow-up report to confirm a few things about Officer Sendak's whereabouts, as you were the last person who spoke with him, as far as we know."

Shiro nods slowly, rotating his cardboard to-go mug in his fingers on the surface of the table as he flicks his gaze from the face of the woman smiling softly across from him to the small folder filled with papers that she's set on the break room table. The edges of it are weathered and worn, and on the cover, there must have once been something written in permanent marker that has long since smudged and faded away. The nails of her fingers are pressed lightly against the surface of it, drumming as though she's impatient and running behind. Her fingernails themselves are short and neatly manicured. Her hands are gnarled with the prominent veins and loose skin of old age, long fingers like the pistoned tips of tree branches, thin wrists disappearing into the cuffs of the uniform jacket that she still hasn't shrugged off, despite the cozy temperature of the break room. This woman introduced herself to him as Detective Sanda, and she'd shaken his hand with an uninhibited, nearly feral level of determination in her eyes. Her grip had been firm and ironclad. Shiro had realized as she'd ushered him off to this break area that she wouldn't be manipulated quite as easily as the other Detective had been.

But, for now, he plays it cool. She hasn't shown her hand yet, and he's been given no indication that they've even started playing. For all she knows, or for all Ryou Yamazaki should know, this meeting is nothing short of what she's promised. Just fact-checking, just making sure that every I is dotted. Just doing the normal record-keeping work, the mundane and backbreaking paper trails that often give Shiro the first opportunity to escape before things get too hairy.

Behind Shiro, the vending machine hums with life and casts a faint blue glow over the table, the folder, his to-go mug of coffee, and this

detective's face. Her silvery hair is cast in the hues of it, holds it like watercolor bled into tissue paper. Her pallid skin and the deep frown wrinkles indented around her mouth give away the ruse of her smile. She doesn't smile often, it looks unnatural even though Shiro has never met her or seen her before since he's moved here. But he can tell, just by looking at her, that she isn't as friendly as she's letting on. He knows that she knows something about him, or suspects it, at the very least. He senses in the stiff gaps of silence between her reassuring words that he isn't nearly as safe now as she'd like for him to believe.

He's grown over the years to be good at reading people and predicting their intentions with little to go by but a few passing looks, a cluster of words, the way that they carry themselves and how they breathe, how they speak, how long their eyes linger on him. Something about this apparent "Detective Sanda" strikes the wrong chord with him, but he decides that it's pertinent to play nice for now. At least while he's at work. At least while the dust is still settling after Officer Sendak's body was recovered at the roadside and the police are apparently taking this case a lot more seriously than they did with the drunkard. And leagues more seriously than they've taken these rogue murders in the past, in a winding trail of cities and communities left behind to mourn their dead as Keith and Shiro have escaped into the night without a trace.

He knows that new technology will only make their existence more difficult in the future. He isn't sure if Keith would have been caught back then, before they met, if the playing field were as even as it seems to be becoming now. These days, even the small towns have DNA testing and fingerprint analysis. Even the most innocuous crimes are put under a careful microscope just in case foul play might be involved.

And the police force here has sent him Detective Sanda today, at work of all places. He's thankful, at least, that she didn't visit his apartment this morning while Keith was still asleep.

Sanda's fingers cease in their drumming just long enough to wrap around her own to-go mug of coffee and lift it to her lips. Her sip is short and manufactured as though to seem casual. Shiro can feel the energy of something popping just below the surface there, as though there are many things going on just behind the curtain of her devious smile that he could never hope to scratch the surface of. Sanda looks at him with a knowing sort of twinkle in her eye. But he calls her bluff silently. He smiles back.

He knows that if the police had any clues that pointed them in his direction indisputably, they wouldn't be sending a sole detective on another cursory information collecting job. He knows that more officers would be here too, that he'd be closed off in a smaller space than a break room that's open to anyone who wants to come in. He'd be cuffed already, he thinks. Sanda wouldn't have wasted time with the pleasantries if she had any reason to believe that he's anything but innocent now, aside from maybe the gut feeling that's led her here.

And Shiro is familiar with that too, makes a living off of dancing just centimeters above the fingers of anyone who's ever suspected him. This Detective Sanda isn't the first person to believe that he's up to something and she surely won't be the last.

But he's practiced for many years and he's better at this than she is. He'd be older than her, too, he thinks, if he were ever allowed to age. He'd be old enough and traveled enough and so good at the more deceptive requirements of this lifestyle, were he mentally older than twenty-five still, that Sanda wouldn't stand a chance even with a full arsenal of information at her disposal.

He knows that he's getting too cocky, and he's assuming a lot just from a few fleeting twitches in her smile. He needs to take this more seriously. As tempting as it might be to see all of this as a particularly sinister game of cat and mouse, he knows that he's still the mouse here, in her eyes and in the eyes of the police force. He knows that one misstep could cost not only himself and Keith, but poor, undeserving Lance a few valuable months that they might have otherwise been able to exist peacefully here. He owes it to Lance not to get too reckless. He owes Lance time to grow accustomed to the concept of moving, to get his affairs in order before they leave.

He needs to stay on his guard now. Sanda might be far less qualified to take him on than she could ever know, but she could still be dangerous. She could still have tricks up her sleeve that he has to be prepared for.

He clears his throat, pausing briefly to glance through the glass wall between this break room and the stark white hall beyond it. It's a slow night here. They're overstaffed and the nurses are trying to figure out who has to go home early. They're always short-staffed when it comes to aides, like himself. So his position tonight is secure while still unneeded. The only other aide working with him tonight—a portly woman in her mid-forties who often prattles on to him about her two kids—was flipping idly through some social media page on her phone

when Sanda pulled him away. She doesn't need his assistance, as far as he knows. There's no real risk involved in spending this time now simply waiting for the clock to run out. Being interviewed by the police doesn't count as break time, and his feet were getting sore anyway.

And anything that takes his mind off of Keith and Lance right now is a welcome distraction, he knows. He's excited for them, happy that they're spending time together, but he can't help but worry, can't help but wonder what Keith might do if he's hungry and Lance tries to offer himself up again. Can't help but allow his guilty, fearful thoughts to linger on how new Lance is at all of this and everything that he still doesn't know yet. All of the mistakes that he could make tonight just because Shiro isn't there to gently guide him.

He knows that it would wreck Keith if somehow, he managed to accidentally hurt Lance. He knows that, despite the standoffish way that Keith seems determined to behave, he has a soft spot in his heart for Lance as well, that he sees something in him that Shiro has since they first met, and he isn't liable to ruin that on purpose. He's protective, in his own way. He cares about Lance even though they've never found the proper opportunity to discuss it. But he can sense it, can feel it in the way that the darkness around Keith sinks away when Lance is nearby. He knows that things have been changed irreparably between them, that Lance has risen into their lives like the warm sun and maybe sometimes it hurts. Maybe it's hard to stare at him for too long, but… he's warm in ways that neither of them has been in a very long time. Keith is interested enough that he accepted Lance's proposal to go out. He's conscientious enough that Shiro doubts that he'd do anything stupid on purpose.

And so, he tries not to think about it, because it should be fine. Keith is smart and he doesn't misstep often, and he's eaten a lot lately, so he shouldn't be so hungry that he'd allow himself to be careless.

He breathes in deeply, mentally wiping that train of thought from his head. And eventually, he turns his eyes back to Sanda, offering her yet another tired but gentle smile and lifting his hand from his mug to wipe at his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he tells her, "This shift isn't regularly too difficult when there's work to do, but on slow nights like this, it's hard to stay awake. So I'm not completely present tonight, unfortunately. I don't know if I can be much help in this state."

Sanda tuts, crinkling the cover of the folder between her fingers as she flips it open. She skims over the documents tucked up front in the first slot. Her short nail scrapes against the paper as she goes down a line of upside down information that Shiro's bleary eyes can't quite make out from across the short length of the table.

However, Shiro *can* see the glossy edges of photographs just under the lip of the folder, and he wonders if she's going to show him evidence from the crime scene as some means of fishing an honest answer from him. He wonders how a normal person might react to being shown such violent images unexpectedly, or if that sort of thing is even legal when he isn't being officially investigated or qualified to break what must be a few dozen HIPAA guidelines or investigation rules, or whatever sorts of rights are afforded to the dead in order to maintain their dignity and privacy. He hasn't heard anything from the station since they interviewed him yesterday, and he hadn't gotten the feeling from the other detectives that they suspected him of wrongdoing, aside from… maybe being interested in Sendak in ways that he definitely had not that night.

The idea of it, given everything that he knows about the man now, sends a small shiver crawling up his spine. But he trains his expression into something more even and curious, watching Sanda's finger moving over the page before it dips down and grasps the edge of that small stack of photos. Shiro holds his breath. He runs through the possibilities, quiet and only half-aware of Sanda watching him anymore.

How would Ryou react to something like that, as a man who's surely seen his fair share of violence in this hospital? He'd be desensitized, surely. It wouldn't disgust him, but maybe it would make him sad. Maybe he'd recognize the violence as an animal attack at face value, but he'd get the animal wrong, maybe he'd know it only from the papers. Maybe he'd been avoiding the story because he'd spoken to that man just hours before. He'd feel guilty because he should have been able to stop it. He'd be running through the possibilities through his head: if he'd stopped being coy and invited Sendak back to his place after drinks, maybe he would be alive now. Maybe they'd be meeting up again. Maybe Officer Sendak would still be breathing and okay if only Ryou hadn't left so soon, and being reminded of this folly only propels him further into guilty, never-ending sadness.

Ryou would be itchy with nerves right now. Ryou would be uncomfortable and maybe even a little afraid. He'd see those photos as a threat to his psyche. He'd be worried that this detective would force

him to see the mutilated corpse that's been haunting his nightmares since the headline hit the papers.

He forces himself to seem surprised by all of this. Shiro tucks away, buried beneath the fumbling facade of a grief-stricken Ryou. Of a vulnerable man who only wants to help people. Someone so disconnected from tragedy that maybe he's mourning now for the very first time.

The photos aren't of the crime scene or of Sendak's frowning face, or of anything even remotely related to the man at all. Shiro feels the breath punched out of his lungs as Sanda places the first picture in the stack between them on the table, swiveling it around so Shiro can gaze down into the smiling blue eyes of a face that he recognizes so painfully well that he can't even keep the shock of seeing him here, now, out of his expression.

"Detective, what—"

"Do you know this boy? He lives in your apartment complex, correct? Have you spoken to him? Do you know his name?"

Shiro's voice feels lodged deep in his throat, thick and impenetrable and smothering stale oxygen in his lungs. He clears his throat again, reaches blindly and clumsily for his coffee and nearly knocks the mug over. Sanda's eyes find it quickly, snap in the direction of Shiro's almost blunder with a shocking level of focus that only inflates the weirdness of this situation further. But Shiro collects himself swiftly, grasps the mug and takes a long gulp of coffee. He calms his nerves and allows his gaze to travel more slowly back to Lance's face in that photograph.

He's grinning widely, holding the smaller of his nephews in his arms. It's sunny and muted green in the backdrop. The sky is almost-blue, overcast gray. He's in that park in the courtyard of the complex. Shiro wonders if Sanda picked this photo on the sole basis of the indisputable proof that lies there: that Lance has obviously been in that park and that park resides in the courtyard of the apartment complex listed as Shiro's address in the police report that they took from him prior. He runs a tongue over his dry lips. His throat unclogs. He can breathe again, and he does so for a long moment. He reaches forward as though to grasp the photo, but his fingers stop short of it. They fall down to the table instead.

"Is he okay?" Shiro asks instead of anything else more important, "He

hasn't gone missing too, has he?"

It's the right thing to say, as Ryou, even if it isn't what Shiro might be feeling right now. But he tucks Shiro even deeper inside of himself, imagines that he fills out the skin of this other man more perfectly. His identity dealer—a young girl, a high school aged prodigy from Arizona referred to him by the last guy before he'd disappeared—had given him a brief outline of Ryou Yamazaki's general stats. It's impossible these days to conjure a person from nothing as it might have been in the past. There are too many records, too much information available online to anyone willing to dig. But there are men who look similar enough to Shiro that the right amount of money can buy them for him. There are records that can be wiped from the availability of the general public, obituaries, and disappearances that can be overlooked if a person knows what they're doing. This girl, Pigeon, as he's been asked to call her the next time that he needs assistance, is better than most dealers that he's crossed paths with before. She'd been quicker about it than what he'd usually expect. Three days of waiting before they'd been able to split. One for the IDs to be printed, two for shipping. Pigeon is efficient, she's skilled. She's good enough that he trusts her to help Lance, too, for a steep price that's worth it. That barely makes a dent in the vast amount of money that he's been hoarding for decades now, even if Moneygrams have fallen enough out of vogue that Pigeon had given him a short lecture about some kind of cyber currency that he can't even remember the name of anymore.

Shiro won't even pretend to understand how Pigeon pulls it off. He doesn't even want to imagine who Ryou Yamazaki might have been before he became an accessory to murder and Shiro's new skin. But he knows that Yamazaki isn't here anymore, isn't using this identity, isn't around to argue that maybe he wouldn't lie to the police and he'd sell Lance out instead, even, and pin the whole thing on him.

But the Yamazaki now works at a hospital helping people. He lives alone in a one bedroom apartment in the less savory parts of a small town. And he's worried that this smiling boy in the photograph might have been attacked by an animal too, as a distant spectator who might have only crossed paths with him once or twice without really connecting or knowing him, as a distant and disconnected Takashi Shirogane has come to know him more intimately.

Sanda's smile twitches at the edges. Her brows bow. That wasn't the reaction that she was hoping for. Inside, deep beneath his thick wall of Ryou Yamazaki's frantic concern, Takashi Shirogane laughs.

“He’s okay, he’s fine as far as I know.” Sanda’s tone is a little bit more strained now. She grasps the photo and jerks it back towards her, shoving it atop the pile, and the pile back into the pocket of the folder. She flips through a few of the papers inside roughly. Shiro wonders how much of the information contained in there is regarding Lance and why. He wonders why she’d even ask that question in the first place, but he doesn’t know how Ryou Yamazaki would phrase it. He doesn’t know if Ryou Yamazaki would even care at all.

He’s caught in a web strung out between his real self and the self that he has to be, in order to continue surviving. He wonders how someone like Detective Sanda would react if he really did come clean. If she’d believe him or simply laugh it off, as though it were some kind of joke. As though maybe the stress and guilt pertaining to this Officer Sendak murder-slash-animal-attack had finally cracked him and he’d lost all sense of reality. He feels comforted by the fact that the truth would surely be too much to handle, doesn’t feel so much as though he’s lying as he feels that he’s protecting a great secret that might threaten the stability of regular human life. Vampires, as far as someone like Detective Sanda knows, are simply something of myth, from children’s dark fairytales, from popularized romantic media that very rarely delves into the true grit and the terrible, desperate reality of Keith’s unfortunate situation.

He waits for Sanda to retrace the steps that have led her here now and to perhaps compose a new course of action now that he’s accidentally derailed what seems to be her biggest lead so far. He feels a little bad about it, for pretending that he’s only barely aware of who Lance is, that yes, he recognizes him as a neighbor but there’s no solid foundation to be built upon beyond that. Sanda clearly has no recollection of any of the nights in which he’s leaned in closer and spoken more tenderly to Lance. She doesn’t seem to know about the time when Lance half-carried him into his apartment to patch him up after this embarrassing, self-sacrificing blunder while feeding Keith. She doesn’t even seem aware of the Christmas dinner that they shared, or the many nights that they’ve met up to talk until the sun rises and Keith returns home for the morning to sleep, so she must not be tailing him too thoroughly just yet. He’s suspicious, however, of what led her to him in the first place. And he knows that this wouldn’t be the sort of visit that would be approved by her superiors, lest they invite criticism from the community for acting solely on premonitions in place of solid facts. As it is, he doubts that Lance is that suspicious of a person to begin with, that he’s done anything even remotely suggestive enough to warrant this line of questioning. Or for the police department to curiously collect these photographs of Lance

with his sister's kids.

He has a feeling that she's acting on her own. He suspects that the police department might not even know that she's here right now, interrogating him by herself.

And so he adds pressure. He leans closer forward as though Ryou might be eager to catch a peek of that photo once again. As though maybe he's suddenly decided to be nosy, since Lance McClain isn't in any danger. Since someone who lives in his complex, who he's seen fleetingly, might actually be involved in the biggest case to rattle this town since that car wreck that the nurses sometimes talk about, quietly among themselves.

"Why are you asking me about him then?" he asks, purposefully airheaded and innocent and every bit as uninvolved in all of this as Ryou needs to be. "He's not… a suspect, is he? He's a pretty small guy… I can't imagine him overpowering someone like that, even… even if that officer had been drinking."

Sanda purses her lips, still quiet and still seeming to wholly embody a deer caught in the proverbial headlights of the unexpected directions that this conversation has taken. Shiro has a lot of experience talking with police and he's had many years to hone his skills when it comes to learning how to converse with mortal humans without giving them any of the information that they don't need to hear while maintaining the disposition of a friendly and honest person.

He reads her easily, understands very clearly that she's been working herself up to this very event, this fated meeting between them, for some time now. He doesn't understand exactly what she wants from him or why she chose this time or place. Perhaps she thinks that meeting him at his job will give her some leverage, some illusion of safety that she might not meet the same end as her co-worker had just a couple of nights ago.

Shiro doesn't know the right words required to explain to her that she's not in any danger if she eases off now. He doesn't know how to tell her that he's figured out that she's doing this on her own, without the affiliation with the police force to back her up. She'd done clumsy work of covering her tracks when she'd first wandered in, introduced herself with her job title without flashing her badge. Felt perhaps over-confident in her ability to fool him into divulging damning information under the guise that this is any semblance of a real police interview, while Shiro understands perfectly well that he isn't even

obligated to tell her the truth under these circumstances. He doesn't even have to sit here and continue speaking. At any point, if he feels so compelled to, he can rise and walk away. But he stays as to not raise suspicion, as to not give her any ammunition that she could later use against him.

He tries to understand the root of this, of where she must have gotten the idea in the first place to suspect him. He wonders what must have led her in the right direction when with certainty, he knows that he hasn't left any evidence behind. He imagines that it might be simply the xenophobic musings of an elderly woman displaced by the presence of a newcomer in her otherwise unchanging town. That maybe she'd rest better at night if she could prove to herself that strangers are dangerous and no one within her midst could ever be capable of hurting another person, that the animals that creep through the dark woods could ever be willing to reach out and maim one of her own.

Shiro wants to tell her that wild animals will always be dangerous. That there's a specific risk involved in taming anything feral and he's got the scars to prove it. He wants to roll up his sleeve and recount each deep indentation of sharp teeth in his skin, and to unwind a tale of many almost-deaths, many almost-escapes from all of this. How many times he's regretfully failed to stop Keith before he hurt someone else and inevitably killed them. And how Keith, at least, is somewhat human. He can feel sadness and fear. He knows what it feels like to love someone.

The creature that killed that officer is just as culpable as a cougar would be, just as incapable of understanding the importance of human life when it's hungry as any predator that might sleep in the shadows of these dark mountain nights would as well. An animal and a monster will never be a human. Shiro knows that you can love an inhuman creature, but it will always be dangerous. There will always be a reason to be careful around it. To fear it and respect it, and to keep it safely locked behind the bars of its cage.

And even after they leave here, Sanda won't be safe. Because Keith isn't the only wild thing that prowls through the dark. The most dangerous thing, he thinks, might be imagining that only humans can kill, that only humans are monsters.

That this town, this state, this entire unknowing world could ever be safe if Sanda caught him in the act tonight. Stupid and blind to the truth that Shiro, right now, is the only thing currently keeping Keith

fed and content.

But he can't explain any of this to her, right now. He can't tell her how the shadows bend and the light is engulfed completely in all of that black. How Keith beguiles him with that same inhumanity that's caused so many deaths. He can't tell Sanda that he's fallen in love with a thing capable of dampening the moon. He can't tell her how that thick veil of darkness feels more like home than he ever felt as a human. He can't explain to her that he has a mission, just as she does, to protect someone who deserves a chance to live. That Keith isn't a shackle that binds him to this reality any more than Sanda's badge or that title might feel like the Earth rested on Atlas's shoulders.

He watches her flounder instead, watches her struggle to articulate an excuse that he reads as a lie immediately, even as she tells him, short and clipped and jittery, "We have reason to believe that Mr. McClain might have information regarding the case."

And he can't stop himself.

"Then why are you interviewing me again instead of just contacting him directly?"

Sanda twitches. She isn't even pretending to smile anymore. Shiro can tell that he's hit a nerve, but Ryou continues to look to her with the same irreproachable, unknowing grin. With the same tender kindness that maybe Lance has come to expect from him as well, despite surely, on some level, understanding that Shiro has to be some kind of a sicko to go along with Keith all this time. To live this life and play this role without monumental guilt dragging him further and further down into madness.

But that's beside the point. The point, right now, lies in Sanda's stiff jaw and the lowness of her tightly-furrowed brows, and the way that she draws in a long breath as though calming herself down before she finally offers him a response.

"Unfortunately, I'm not at liberty to divulge that information at this time."

Shiro almost laughs.

But he nods then, apologizes and tells her that he really needs to return to his work soon. The evening staff will be leaving shortly and he's one of two nurse's aids on the night shift. She agrees easily enough, seems eager if anything to be rid of him. And he pushes up

from the table, grasping his to-go mug and taking another long drink, draining the last cold remnants of it before tossing it in the trash.

“Good luck with your investigation, Detective.”

He tells her with a smile and a short wave on the way out.

He doesn’t know if he won or lost in this battle, or if that even matters in the grand scheme of the war that lies ahead. He doesn’t know with certainty that he didn’t just make her more suspicious, if Keith is safe now, if she still suspects Lance, or if any of this did more harm than good. But he feels just a little bit haughty as he leaves and she has no way to stop him. He feels, at least, as though he’s managed to abate her progress for just a little bit longer.

He’ll have to tell Keith, then Lance, to be careful when he sees them again. They’ll have to shorten their stay here by another growing amount of weeks or months. But at least he knows now that there’s a time limit set in place, that the clock has been ticking and will keep ticking, hopefully, without running out too soon.

He just needs to finish his shift tonight.

And if Sanda is here, now, at least he knows that she isn’t tailing Lance.

At least he’s positive that she’ll live to see tomorrow, as Keith is far too busy with Lance to see her as the threat that she so clearly is and to act without repercussion in the only way that he knows how.

Sanda is a fool if she thinks that she’s safe. She doesn’t even know that she’s looking in the wrong direction.

She’s determined, but so stupidly, willfully blind to the real danger that lies in the dark, endless night.

Ryou Yamazaki has made his way down the hall by the time that Sanda rises from her seat. When her smile draws out over the manufactured flat line of her frown. She pulls a single rubber glove and a plastic bag from the inner pocket of her coat. She takes the glove between her fingers without putting it on, grasps the edge of Yamazaki’s to-go cup and shoves it carefully into the evidence bag.

And she takes her leave as well—back into the quiet dark of the night, glancing over her shoulder once, guiltily, as though she can feel the blackness of this world bathed in shadow somehow watching her

back.

Lance huffs, eyes lingering on the breath that he's left hanging in the air in the dim light of his phone, from his spot tucked away on a patch that he'd cleared in the residual snow on the rusted merry-go-round in the apartment complex's park. His gaze falls back to the screen of his phone, and he tries to focus on the animated ellipsis of Hunk's impending response to his text earlier.

It's a mundane conversation; Hunk is at a party and he's bored. He wants to know why Lance isn't willing to come along. He thinks that tonight is another "bad mood" night and rightfully so, Lance thinks. He has no reason to believe that Lance might forego a social gathering in pursuit of something more entertaining because it's never happened before, unless he was in another depressive mood. Unless he's been suffering from the sadness that often cloaks him during the winter months, when it's far too dark and cold to spend more time in the sun. When he's reminded so vividly of the twin presences absent from his life here, and he can't find the strength within himself to do much of anything but mope and whine and wrap himself up in every blanket in his possession, in a cocoon of perpetual sadness, alone, in his bedroom.

But sans those miserable nights, he rarely rejects an invitation to attend a party because there's never anything better to do in this dead-end town than get blitzed. Lance hasn't found the right opportunity to tell him that he met someone, and he isn't even sure if that would be a good idea in the first place. He definitely hasn't spoken to him about leaving, definitely hasn't had that very crucial conversation with Veronica about the texts that he'd stumbled upon on her phone earlier this morning. That's a whole can of worms in and of itself. He wonders if splitting earlier than originally anticipated might be worth it just so he'll never have to experience that belated "birds and the bees" conversation that he and Veronica have been skirting around since he was a kid.

He tuts, his mood suddenly gone sour. He should be excited right now, he knows. He should be over the moon. But waiting is difficult and it's cold outside, and Hunk's responding text is just a typoed version of

“cool, fine, whatever you want” that’s so haphazardly written out that it feels like cracking a cipher when he lifts the screen closer to his face to translate Hunk’s drunk-speak.

But then he’s left with not even a virtual conversation partner as he waits. He’s left alone in the thick black and the cold of the snow and the creaky fixtures around him that startle him just a little bit each time that an especially strong breeze blows through and jostles them. He feels just a little idiotic sitting around here, feeling so vulnerable and so frightened in a courtyard where he’s played since he was young. And waiting around like a desperate moron for a monster that might not even come tonight—that might have found better things to do with its time, like gnawing on some other scoundrel or stalking Shiro in the shadows as Lance is starting to suspect that he often does when he’s away.

He wonders where the quietest spot in the town is, wonders if there’s a single place here that Keith hasn’t already mapped out. But he continues to wait, continues to look forward to the moment when that darkness unfolds and reveals something ivory-skinned and nearly translucent that shines brighter in the blackness than the moon in a clear night sky. And he doesn’t have to wait much longer, because one moment he’s alone, and the next, there’s a weight dragging down one end of the merry-go-round, just on the other side of the rungs that he props his weight against. He’s startled but he hides it just as quickly, as a shocked gasp rises and is subsequently smothered in his throat.

And he finds himself staring into the twin dark pools of Keith’s eyes, somehow even blacker than all of the night air around them.

“You wanted to meet me,” Keith tells him, “You’re wearing different clothes under your coat.”

These two contrasting statements sit strangely next to each other, and for a moment, Lance’s brain blanks as he tries to thread together exactly what Keith must have intended to convey to him by saying both in that order. He straightens himself up, shoving his phone into the front pocket of his coat and looking down at himself as though he might actually be able to make out any of the details of his clothing in the night just as easily as Keith apparently has.

But he knows that he wore a more comfortable pair of pants tonight and a slightly-oversized flannel that might hopefully keep him warmer in the plummeting winter chill. The new year is quickly approaching, only two days away now, and Lance knows that winters here can be

harsh, especially at night. And he knows that Keith has already been a lot to keep up with during their past meetups, and that he disappears a lot, and he definitely doesn't want to be stuck where they're headed without the proper resources to sustain himself if Keith decides to run away again. He'd definitely prefer to have picked a better "date" location, all things considered, but after going over the options, the places that are even open this late and the destinations where someone like Keith might not raise some very unwanted suspicions, his dreadful heart had known, even as he'd decided on this location, that it would surely be the only place that would successfully capture and hold Keith's attention.

He draws in a breath.

"Yeah, humans get cold, Keith. If we're going to be running around in the woods, I wanna conserve some heat just in case you decide to ditch me again."

Keith doesn't react as though he's offended, not in an immediately obvious way, but his jaw clenches and his brows twitch, and Lance can't stop the sly smile that rolls over his lips when he realizes that he's actually managed to strike a chord.

Keith's attention is diverted momentarily to something off in the woods, and Lance knows that it must be loud here. He isn't sure if Keith's senses are sharper when he's well fed like this, or if maybe, when he's in good health, it's easier to ignore. He hasn't seen Keith completely drained as Shiro apparently has, and he wonders how strange he'd look, how devoid of humanity or dried out, thin and wavering and surely so breakable. Shiro had seemed pained when he'd thought about it, had seemed to be carrying the guilt of allowing Keith's health to plunge to such dangerous levels in his heart despite the fact that Keith is just fine now, but…

Lance shakes his head. He's sure that he'll understand all of this much better later, and tonight isn't the night to feel bad. Tonight is his first date with this creature that he's been enraptured by for months now, tonight is just another step in the right direction for both of them, and Shiro, too, even though Lance knows that he won't be home from his overtime shift until it's far too late to come to join them.

But he feels as though he knows Shiro better than he knows Keith, and that Shiro, still, hasn't managed to reconnect some mysterious flame that he'd shared with Keith long ago. Lance knows that the only way to mend things between the three of them is to work on each

individual part. And he knows that understanding Keith better might assist him in helping Shiro, that growing closer to Keith will make the entire foundation of this new relationship stronger—enough so that even the prospect of this date tonight makes him feel leagues more confident calling it a “relationship” in the first place.

So he pushes up and off of the shaky ledge of the merry-go-round, pivots around and extends an open hand in Keith’s direction, inviting him to grasp it, to steady himself as he climbs off as well. Keith doesn’t need the help, Lance knows, but he takes his hand anyway. His fingers feel like ice, smooth and free of the bumps and subtle ridges in human skin that he only notices now in their absence. He doesn’t let go either, not once his feet are planted firmly and silently in the snow. Not once he’s drawn closer to Lance and waits, quiet and unbreathing, for Lance to lead them in the desired direction. Lance wills down the warmth that rises under his skin, wills down the skittering, excited nerves that prickle through his veins like a million insects’ feet.

He pulls his phone out again, opening the map app and clicking on a pre-logged address that he’s kept in his files, just in case he might have ever needed it, for years now, but seldom actually had the will to visit until tonight. It’s a fifteen-minute journey on foot. He turns his eyes in the direction of the black windows of his apartment. Even Veronica has gone to bed by now, has been asleep since before he slipped out again after changing his clothes. She’d be livid if she knew that he was wandering around at this time of the night. She wouldn’t understand that he’s been in danger since the moment that he watched Shiro and Keith leaving their car and entering their building that very first night, but never safer than he will be, now, accompanied by the very beast that maimed one man and disappeared another, many months ago.

What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her, anyway. It’s not like she hasn’t been keeping secrets too.

Lance feels strangely confident in his position here. He feels like a lion tamer showing off tricks to a crowd of adoring circus-goers. He feels like a man who’s conquered a great dragon, as though he’s unstoppable in the presence of this mysterious, dangerous creature while any reasonable person might feel more afraid.

But Keith, right now, doesn’t seem to be hungry, and he definitely hasn’t ever given Lance the impression that he’s just biding his time before he makes a meal of him. Right now, Keith just waits patiently.

He stares off into the deep abyss of darkness with round, dilated pupils. With a vacant expression, as though he might be standing with open eyes, but deep in sleep. He looks more doll-like when he's still like this. Lance finds himself acutely aware of every aspect of his disposition that's so uncomfortably inhuman. Too-smooth skin, too-black eyes. The stillness and the absence of expanding and contracting lungs. The ability to stand out against the shadows, like a blank piece of paper untouched by bleeding black ink.

Keith is a curious creature, human but not. Living, but maybe really only half-alive. Feral but so eager to be tamed. And he's beautiful, the most gorgeous thing that Lance has ever seen in his life. As though crafted painstakingly to wear this beauty like the vibrant red scales of a coral snake. That face should be a warning for any stupid man to stay away, but he's too pretty, too tempting to touch and so deceptively so.

Lance shoves those thoughts deep into the back of his mind for now. He isn't sure how long Keith might be willing to wait for him to start walking, but if he stands here for much longer, they're going to run out of time. He tries to be gentle when he tugs Keith in the direction of the mouth of the complex parking lot. He wonders how much quicker Keith could traverse this distance if he were allowed to climb or teleport or spread the bat wings that Lance still isn't totally convinced that he doesn't have and take flight into the dark sky.

"It's not very far," he reassures himself more than Keith, because he knows that these short minutes surely feel like nothing compared to the centuries that he's spent cooped up in hiding, "It's quiet there too, don't worry."

Keith doesn't speak or breathe or nod. He barely even seems to be moving, despite matching Lance's pace. Lance makes a point of sticking to the trees and the darker paths. Few cars pass, few headlights illuminate the streets around them, but he can't help but feel as though the whole world might be watching them. Can't help but suspect that maybe this is a very normal sensation to feel around Keith.

And while Keith's hand is frigid, it retains the warmth of Lance's body heat in time. It still feels clammy and borderline silicone, still feels as though he's grasping at one of the fancy spatulas that Veronica brought home from her work's Secret Santa last month, too smooth and too strange and not hard or soft enough to be familiar in a way that ever feels comfortable to hold onto, even still. But something

about it is nice anyway. Something about the silence settled over them is pleasant. Lance is painfully aware of how difficult it may or may not be for Keith not to attack him right now, and he wonders if this is how bullfighters feel on the other side of a tightly-locked gate. If they feel as small and powerless and so foolishly trusting, or if they feel a power in that safety. If they think that the animal on the other end of the bars wouldn't maim them just as its nature is to maim them, because somehow…

They're special. Just as Lance realizes far too late, that for Keith to be here with him right now, in some way, he must be special too.

That train of thought is dangerous, he knows it. He distracts himself instead with the moving cursor of his location on the map on his phone. On the short distances that they're covering, on the looming blip of their destination highlighted with a big blue dot just at the top of the screen.

Krona is the name of a cemetery, one of the nicest in town.

Lance hasn't been there in a long time, not since a double funeral that he attended when he was just a little a kid.

For a long time, it felt blasphemous, forbidden and wrong to even consider it.

But with Keith, for whatever reason, he feels that he might be strong enough to finally face those headstones and tell them, belatedly,

"I think I'm going to be okay."

Maybe it's weird to have his first date in a graveyard. Maybe this is just another bad idea in the long trail of regretful decisions that have led him here and now, traveling through the night with a monster that he still isn't certain won't break its resolve and devour him if it gets too hungry.

Maybe he should have waited for Shiro, or he should have thought this through before he'd asked. But it feels like he's running out of time. It feels like he might keep putting this off until the opportunity to see his parents' graves again slips through his stupid, lazy fingers.

He tries to embody that feeling of being powerful—the bullfighter on the other end of the bars. The lion tamer holding the ring for the lion to leap through. Keith's hand is firm and soft and frigid. His hair frames his face in gentle black curls, moved softly in the breeze as

they walk. His cheeks are pallid and devoid of the chilly color that Lance can feel numbly in his own skin.

And for some reason, he knows that everything is going to be okay.

Keith might not understand what any of this means. He might not get why it matters so much to come here or why Lance spent so much time avoiding it.

But he still came along anyway, he still showed up.

He still cared enough, and he's holding Lance's hand, and he's walking with him even though he might be able to get there faster if he went off on his own.

Lance isn't sure why he's so enamored with a creature like Keith. He's beautiful and he's scary and he's perplexing but strangely simple.

But maybe, deep down, it's just tempting to love a being that won't ever die. That he won't ever avoid in a cemetery just outside of town.

That won't ever be nothing more than a name engraved on a headstone, silent and absent and struck from every record of his life from this moment on, as though God himself had blotted him out of existence.

This night is a single fleeting moment in the eternity of Keith's endless life. It must not feel like more to him than a short intake of breath. Than a solitary heartbeat. Than a moment coming and passing in the blink of an eye—an entire extended period that feels like forever to Lance, as he trembles, and his heart pounds harder and faster.

As he imagines what he might feel when he kneels in front of those headstones and he wonders why he was stupid enough to make these plans tonight.

He just has to say goodbye to them, for good, he knows. This is just one box to be ticked on the long list of responsibilities that he needs to see to before he goes away.

It's not much of a date, sure, but it's necessary.

And Keith doesn't seem to be complaining. Keith, reliably, continues to follow along. He doesn't ask why Lance's pulse is pounding so hard now. He doesn't ask why his breathing is labored and shallow.

He holds Lance’s hand through all of this, all the way from the apartment complex to the rickety, rusted gates of the cemetery.

And he doesn’t let go for a long time, as though somehow he knows that Lance needs something strong to hold onto. As though he could ever understand what any of this could possibly mean.

Chapter End Notes

> **a note from epi:** hi everyone!!! if you're reading this that means you have excellent tastes because this fic is incredible, right?? please don't hesitate to let moth know what you enjoyed about this chapter in the comments!! she deserves it <3

Chapter 17

The dark trees shudder in the breeze, writhing around in the blind black of the sky overhead like the long fingers of giant hands closing down around them. The grass underfoot is stiff with frozen dew, crispy under his shoes as he trudges forward, lighting his way with the flashlight on his phone as his breath blinds him further in puffs of condensation hanging in the air.

Lance shivers as the wind creeps through the gaps of his sleeves, up under his coat and at the shells of his ears, chilling him and propelling him further forward into the night. Into the shadowed mouth of this clearing in the trees. Towards the destination that's currently blipping around the big blue dot on his phone's map. Keith let go of his hand just moments before they wandered in here. His black eyes had lingered on the sign overhanging the long, winding fence wrapped around the border of the grounds. His lips had pursed, and he'd turned to Lance as though he'd had a question just on the tip of his tongue. But then he'd shrugged it off, released Lance's hand, and taken the first steps through the gateway as though he'd had any idea of where Lance was hoping to lead him when he'd first proposed this destination on the phone.

Keith is gone now, dissipated into the inky thick of nightfall draped over this cemetery. He's a whisper in the short distance, in the black bars of tree trunks, and a thousand insect eyes that Lance can feel roving over him and humming their night songs in the back of his skull like static. But he isn't tangible or real now any more than any lingering spirits of the dead, calling out from beneath the six feet of soil stacked atop them. Any more real than perhaps the hope that Lance might have had some time ago, when he was a kid, that the funeral hadn't actually happened, that the caskets were empty, and eventually he'd go home and his parents would be waiting for him there.

It still feels acutely strange and otherworldly and wrong to tread the ground in this graveyard. It still feels as though he's pointedly misdirected himself somewhere that he actually isn't supposed to be.

And without Keith now, he feels his bravado and any remnants of bravery that might have compelled him here swiftly squeezed out of him. He feels like an idiot for even considering that he could be strong enough to face this place. Especially without someone reliable to cling

to. Especially when he'd been stupid enough to think that Keith could ever understand what this cemetery actually means to him.

Lance isn't even sure now exactly why he'd thought that this would be a good idea, that this would be fun for Keith or that he'd suddenly develop the ability to empathize with human emotions. Perhaps he'd believed that Keith could discern some level of understanding from seeing this place, from taking in the rows of headstones with their birth dates and death dates, with the wilting flowers and the photographs and small trinkets left like ritual offerings at their bases. That miraculously, he'd learn belatedly why life and death and the tragic temporary human condition should have been important to him. Maybe Lance had just imagined that a vampire would enjoy taking a late night stroll through a graveyard, that it seemed like a very befitting, otherworldly backdrop for a creature that exists in some way within the shallow threads between this world and the next. This just seemed like the kind of place where creatures of his kind would generally want to hang out, like the vampire equivalent of a food court at the mall or a clubhouse in some kid's back yard. Lance had thought that perhaps Keith was drawn to the extraordinary as he was, too, something extraordinary. That maybe, a place that chills Lance to the bone like a graveyard would be exactly the kind of place where Keith would feel more at home.

But Krona is one of three cemeteries available in this town and it would have been quicker if Lance had decided to tour him through the old military graveyard instead. Maybe more interesting too and less depressing. Maybe less painful in his chest than standing here now, catching sight of a miniature-sized headstone in the spotlight of his phone with 2003-2007 printed in bold, embossed letters on the glossy face of it. Lance purses his lips, grimaces and shakes his head. His arm jerks the light away, shining it through the thick throng of trees some yards in the other direction as though he might be able to catch the shine of Keith's reflectively animalistic eyes somewhere in the dark. He isn't sure where Keith went off to, doesn't remember feeling him slip away until he'd turned and been met with nothing but an empty space where a body should have been, but he can feel him all around in here. Can feel him like a hundred ghosts of these names on these headstones, watching him and judging him and wondering why he'd disrespect their legacies by bringing some ungodly monster to look at their final resting places without truly being capable of understanding what they mean.

He has a vague recollection of how to get to the plots that he's looking for, but he takes his time anyway. He brushes his fingers over the

chilled tops of a few headstones, careful to step around them as to not walk directly over anyone's grave. He tries his hardest not to focus too hard on the names or the dates—recognizes a few surnames from the newspapers and stories around town. Some recent, some from long ago. Some so fresh that the raised dirt catches under the tip of his shoes, and some left alone for so long that the grass is tall enough to obscure his ankles.

The snow around this place melted recently, he can tell by the damp squish of the soil under his shoes. He doesn't want to think about how the fluctuation in temperatures might affect the decomposition of a dead body, doesn't want to ponder what some of these hundred-year-old bodies might look like if their caskets were to be exhumed. But it's a spooky train of thought that only exacerbates the looming sense of dread draped over this place, that only makes him feel all the more as though he's the unwitting and idiotic protagonist in some kind of scary movie who was truly dumb enough to lead a creature of the night into this abandoned, barren pocket, so far away from civilization, where no one would be close enough for miles to hear him scream.

He can hear branches snapping close by in the trees just over the sloped poles of the fence that boxes in the grave plots, and he swallows the lump that rises thick and smothering in his throat. His heartbeat spikes in his chest, his breath hitches, but he convinces himself to keep his flashlight shone in front of him. He tells himself that Keith won't let anything happen to him here, hopefully, if he's even paying enough attention to him anymore. He can still hear that familiar muted whispering in the dark shadows all around him, can still feel the prickle of a hundred eyes crawling over his skin. He doesn't know if Keith can control that or not. He doesn't know if Keith even understands how much he definitely does not need any of the creepy, horror movie horseshit right now, on top of everything else that this graveyard has to offer him all by himself in the dark with only a dim mobile flashlight to guide his way.

But he continues forward bravely, following a memorized path that Veronica used to lead him down every so often when he was younger. He can still remember the tightness of her hand clasped around his, can still recall how it had felt to hover close behind her as she waddled over the thorny, overgrown pathways with a hand rested carefully over her swollen, pregnant belly. The last time that they visited, she'd been seven and a half months along with his niece. She'd wanted to talk to their parents about it, and Lance, an angsty, emotional teenager still grappling with a new life without them, had

openly discounted the whole thing: ranted and raved and bitched as only a teen could about how absolutely moronic it was to talk to someone who died years ago. He'd told her brazenly, *"They aren't here anymore, so why not just talk to them at home? Or church, or like… literally anywhere else? What's even the point of coming out here to this shithole just to talk to someone who obviously can't hear you?"*

He just hadn't understood why the cemetery mattered, hadn't comprehended how the connection between the living or the dead could feel amplified in a place designed for the specific purpose of reminding the living of those who left them behind. He'd thought that Veronica was nothing but an idiotic sheep of a person for following such a stereotypical path. For wasting even a moment's thought on their parents when neither of them could think anymore at all.

The graveyard, in his opinion back then, was the worst part of it all. It was an empty and depressing collection of lives cut too short and people remembered only as long as their family carried their legacy. It was a shallow and broken place with headstones worn so dull that the names couldn't be read anymore, with some plots left unattended for so long that they were nothing but a testament to how unloved a person might have been in life. People, he'd known, might not have all been equal while alive, but in death, his loving parents shared the same rotten ground with everyone else. Their bodies decomposed in the same soil as a stillborn child, as a domestic abuser, as a criminal or a saint, as a rich man or a poor man.

And while their bodies rotted in their boxes, they weren't even there anymore, not in any way that Lance would have wanted for them to be. They were absent from his life when he needed them, not close by when he was hurting or afraid, when anything good happened, when the world was daunting and terrible and more than anything else he'd needed them there to comfort him. And back then, Lance had hated them for it, just a tiny bit. He'd hated that they'd left him here to fester with anger and sadness in their absence, hated that he didn't have a father to give the cards to that they used to make in grade school for father's day, didn't have a mother who would sing him to sleep. They'd abandoned him here, in this frozen Hell, and they couldn't even understand how angry he was, how sad and scared and lonely they'd left their youngest son behind to be. It was selfish to die, he'd felt that too. It was selfish to leave someone behind who would miss you so, so terribly.

But Veronica had just smiled softly when he'd berated her, she'd raised her other hand to clutch just at the bottom of her large, round

belly.

She'd looked to him then, stopping and swaying just slightly unsteady on her feet.

And she'd told him, "I talk to her too."

She'd nodded her chin downward at her stomach.

"She can't understand me either, but… I just like to talk to her. Even if there's no chance that she can hear me, I want her to know that I love her and that I'll *always* love her. And so… I talk to her, too."

He'd scoffed then. He hadn't been compassionate enough to understand it. He'd felt like the sole victim in the deaths of his parents, felt as though no one could truly understand the cavity of churning sadness and rage that continued for so long to brew inside of him. He'd thought back then that he was the only one from which anything of value had been stolen. He hadn't been big enough to understand that Veronica was hurting too. He hadn't been mature enough to know that she was doing whatever she could to be strong for him, and that she deserved this one, small thing: this sole moment of weakness. That in essence, he'd always demanded too much of her time, of her strength, of her willfulness until eventually, she bled herself dry trying to be everything that he needed her to be.

Veronica played the role of older sister, then mother and father. And he fought her every step of the way, he knows that now. And he wishes that he could go back to that sole moment and apologize. He wishes that he'd been less blinded by how much he'd been in pain to realize that she'd been in pain too.

He can't take it back, he knows that. He can't undo the awful things that he's done any more than he can conjure his parents back to life from this hard and silent, frozen ground.

But maybe, secretly, if he visits them tonight, he can understand what she'd meant back then. And he can make it up to her in some small way, by finally coming around. By finally growing big enough to face his parents in person without turning his face away in shame, or anger, or weakness.

It's been years since they visited these grounds. And Lance doesn't know why he's decided to come here tonight, with Keith, of all people, who he knows could never even begin to know or care why any of this matters in the first place. Maybe he just feels like he should visit at

least once more before he leaves. He doesn't know if he'll ever have this opportunity again. Or maybe he's finally beginning to understand what Veronica meant back then—that even if their parents can't hear them, even if there's no chance that they'll ever understand…

It doesn't hurt to try. If a creature like Keith is able to exist, if something mythical and deadly and so beautiful and dangerous roves these trees and watches over him with those many dark invisible eyes, maybe it isn't completely insane to believe that his parents, somehow, could hear him if he tried to talk to them. Maybe, somewhere out there, they really could be watching over him. He doesn't know if he believes in heaven or the afterlife, or souls. But now, with the introduction of Keith into his reality, he isn't sure what could be real or fake, or what's worth believing in at all anymore.

But there's a chance that his parents exist in a plane that isn't this one. There's the smallest likelihood that perhaps, they've been guiding him all this time.

He isn't sure why that thought makes him feel a little uneasy. He doesn't know why suddenly he's riddled with guilt.

But he keeps trudging forward, keeps shining his phone's flashlight to illuminate the overgrown path, passing headstones that feel only distantly familiar, trudging over uneven ground that trips him but can never successfully convince him to turn around and leave.

The cemetery isn't large by any means. It's roughly the size of the apartment complex courtyard, but twisting and unkempt enough that it's far more difficult to navigate in the dark. Just at the end of it, just before the last few rows of headstones meet the vine-gnarled fence, Lance stops. He can see the edges of two headstones spotlighted in the shine of his phone, feels suddenly frozen and rooted deep into the ground beneath his feet, unable to move or breathe and suddenly regretting the moronic inspiration that led him to this cemetery in the first place. He's too afraid to read the text on the headstones, too uncomfortable to think about the dates engraved deep in the stone.

The night around him is empty and silent and cold. His breath hangs, thick and translucent white, in the air in front of him. The light of his phone jitters as his hands shake, and his knees feel suddenly weak. He manages a few stumbled steps forward before he folds inward, before he slips slowly down to the cushion of damp, frosted grass and uneven, wet soil. His phone drops to the ground with him and the light disappears, and he breathes, strangled and stiff and shallow, as

he tries to control the rampant pounding of his heart.

His mother was thirty-six years old when she died. He remembers thinking that it sounded so old as the priest said it, remembers thinking back then that he'd be a wrinkly, hunched and almost half-alive man at that age, that she'd lived practically forever, so why did she have to give up then? But he's nineteen now. He's drawing nearer to that number. And Keith, he doesn't even know, could be a hundred years or even a century old. Thirty-six, to Keith, might sound like nothing more than a speck of time in a grand abyss of years tangled behind him. But thirty-six, even to Lance now, doesn't seem to be very much time at all. His mother never lived to her forties, never lived long enough to see her youngest child graduate from high school. She never met her grandchildren, never met their father or watched the glorious rise and fall of that explosive relationship that consumed so many months of Lance's late teens and soured Veronica to dating for many years to come.

His mother isn't here to tell him what a bad idea this is now. She isn't here to watch him tempted by this monster hiding in the dark, assisting in these crimes, grappling with the decision to abandon his honest, human life and exist instead as the second servant of a creature that doesn't even entirely understand the morality involved in killing a person. Lance realizes suddenly that for the first time in his life he doesn't know if his mother would even be proud of him anymore. He doesn't know what's right or what's wrong or what she'd think of his current situation. He knows in his heart that he's falling hard for Shiro, that he's so curious about Keith. That their stories tug at his heartstrings and they make him feel alive again. That they feel like the warm suns and sunny beaches that he's yearned for so many years in the cold dark, here. But he doesn't know if she'd even understand that, or if she'd be ashamed in him. If she'd regret leaving just because her child grew up to be such a monumental disappointment.

He's overcome by an emotion that rattles him, that pins him here, stalled between moving or speaking or crying, caught between standing up and coming closer or turning heel and running away. He draws in a breath that catches on everything stuck in his throat, on the accusations and the anger and the sadness, the realization that even if his parents could hear him now, there's nothing that they could do to help him. He doesn't know what he needs from them now anyway. He doesn't know what he would do if anyone but Shiro and Keith knew what he's planning to do in the near future and if they tried to stop him. If they told him that this miserable dead-end life is

definitely better than the alternative, that the true secret of existence is that it doesn't get better, no matter how far you run or how much you hide. That everyone carries this same enormous, all-encompassing sadness inside of them, but they've figured out how to live with it. That he's the only weird one who refuses to just keep walking. That he chases these fantasies of a happier him, of a better existence—childish and stunted and too stupid to understand that this is all that there is.

He knows that Keith and Shiro aren't happy either. He doesn't know why he's always tried to convince himself that he could be better in their shoes.

And these headstones feel like mirrors now, reflecting those inward accusations right back at him: if his parents were alive right now, they wouldn't be proud of him. His mother would be disappointed that he'd stayed behind to rot here in this cold grave of a town. His father would be infuriated that he's been tempted by the wiles of something so evil and sinister that it could murder entire populations if left unchecked. Lance feels panic rising in his chest, bubbling up in his throat and clouding his thoughts. He knows that he's small and stupid and petty. He knows that he's forever tempted by the first opportunity that feels too good to be true. He knows that he could leave here and he'd carry this sadness with him anyway, no matter how far he ran away. He knows that nothing gets better, that his parents would hate the person who he is now, that Veronica wouldn't be coaxing him into moving on if she knew how he's planning to do it, but—

His breath, which has been growing harder and harder to inhale the more he panics, suddenly stops in his throat. He feels the cold weight of a hand on his shoulder, like skin made of snow. And he hears those whispers growing softer, that darkness surrounding him, encasing him like a thick blanket of frozen night. His head jerks around and his eyes find the black beads of Keith's. He remembers how to breathe when he sees him, resists the urge to throw himself into Keith's arms like some kind of dumb, terrified child.

"You look like you're about the cry," Keith tells him simply, softly, "Why do humans do things that make them sad?"

Lance's fingers tangle in the frosty grass beneath his palms. He can feel the ice under his knees melting and soaking into the fabric of his pants. His eyes draw slowly from Keith's to the headstones in front of him, the twin McClain last names, the graves curiously manicured and polished recently. He wonders how often Veronica comes here without telling him. Suddenly, he feels even more guilty than before.

He swallows hard, catching his breath. He pushes out a hoarse sigh of a laugh, his eyes so caught on his mother's name that he can't will himself to look away from it.

"I guess it beats the alternative—you know… not feeling anything. Even bad emotions are worth feeling."

Out of his peripherals, he can see Keith tip his head to the side, how confused dogs do in those cute pet videos that Hunk sometimes sends him. But the sharp line of his white jaw extends forward soon after, as he faces the headstones more directly. As his vision focuses where Lance's lies, and he's silent, still and unbreathing, as though he's just another thing in this graveyard made of stone.

"I have feelings too." Keith's voice isn't weighed down by any discernible inflection, and the words are presented matter-of-factly, as though Keith might be informing him that he, too, sleeps or eats or dreams. As though maybe Lance might not know this about him, and he's cluing him in on some big secret. A "by the way" statement that's sandwiched between the intensity of this moment in an idiosyncratic way that somehow manages to calm Lance's wild nerves and unbridled emotions effortlessly. "I don't want to be sad though, not how you humans do. I don't want to be around anything that makes me feel bad. I try to be around things that make me happy instead. Like Shiro, or you. That's why I don't understand places like this, where you bury your dead. You come here just to be reminded of how sad you are. You come here to remember everything that you've lost."

Lance can't stop the shuddered sigh that escapes him. He can't help the wetness that rises slowly at the corners of his eyes. He reaches up one hand and places it over Keith's, holds it there despite how cold it feels, like touching snow with naked skin. He reads over the birth and death dates on his parents' headstones for a long moment, over and over until the indentations in the stone feel branded in his brain. In the distance, the branches of the trees surrounding them sway and groan, and owls hoot and night creatures sing their songs. And Keith, just next to him, is still and quiet and cold.

"Sometimes, being sad reminds you of how good it feels to be happy. Thinking about what you've lost makes you appreciate everything that you have. It seems… kind of silly, doesn't it? Like it wouldn't work, but… I know that I'm lucky to have you and Shiro because I know what it feels like to be alone. I know what it feels like to lose someone that I love, and… I don't want to lose either of you. I don't want to lose anyone ever again."

It's a slow moment of silence after, and Keith slides his hand from Lance's shoulder down to the ground between them. Lance's hand follows, still wrapped around it, and in the dark, in the quiet and the loneliness, faced with so many wordless headstones with their names and dates and small descriptions, they hold hands. And Keith, gradually, rests his head against Lance's shoulder. His hair tickles the side of Lance's face. He feels like some kind of moving doll. It feels like being embraced by an ice sculpture.

But he's soft no matter how frigid he is. He's close and he's here and even his silence feels comforting in a way that Lance realizes, belatedly, that he hasn't allowed himself to feel in a very long time. He buries his face in Keith's hair, breathes in sharply and ignores the hot stripes of tears rolling down his cheeks.

Keith doesn't mention it either.

He doesn't shove away or ask questions or react in any way that might put a boundary between them as Lance holds him tightly and sobs.

But he does wrap his arms around Lance, pulls him closer and rests his nose into the collar of Lance's coat, into the skin of his collarbone with his arms like frost chilling every part of Lance's body that he touches. It's a quiet, dismal night. The blackness hovers over the graveyard and the tall grass is weighed down by ice and residual snow. The headstones are skimmed with condensation, the animals in the dense envelope of trees cry out and shudder through the bush and the branches and the dark.

And Lance cries and cries, and holds Keith tighter. And Keith is hushed and unmoving, but he doesn't let go or move away.

Maybe he doesn't understand any of this and maybe he never will.

But Lance needs him now and he's here. He's one constant in a myriad of confusion and agony and disappointment. He's the one thing keeping Lance grounded now, no matter how far he tries to slip away.

"Oh, you're home. How did your date with Lance go?"

"It wasn't a date."

“You went out somewhere alone with him, right? I bet Lance thought that it was a date.”

“It wasn’t a date.”

Keith shoves up from the floor, stalking through the dark living room into the adjoined kitchen and moving seemingly blindly through the shadows in there. Shiro knows that there’s nothing waiting in the fridge for him, and he wouldn’t know how long to heat it up in the microwave even if there was. But he understands that Keith needs to put some distance between them, if only to separate himself from the undeniable reality of the time that he spent with Lance earlier tonight, and how his own emotions are given away easily, even though he still seems to believe that he’s harder to read than he really is.

“How was work?”

It’s an unexpected question, but Shiro doesn’t dither in his surprise for very long. He shrugs his bag from his shoulder, working out the tension bundled there. The bag finds its nightly resting place next to the door, joined soon after by his shoes, and his coat tossed down atop the group of them. He breathes in deeply, feeling oddly at home in their empty, black apartment, but maybe just relieved that another long shift is done and over with.

“It was okay,” he says softly, taking the first few steps into the center of the living room, “I wish I could have gone out with both of you tonight. Another officer came to talk to me, but… something was different. I’m not sure how to tell Lance that we might have to leave earlier than expected.”

“That’s my fault.”

“No one blames you for what happened, Keith. Knowing what we know now about that man… I think you made the right choice. Even if he wasn’t going to do anything that night, do you think Lance would feel confident leaving his family behind with that kind of monster still living here?”

Keith scoffs, an effort entirely manufactured with false breath, with indignation that swells in the pattering whispers in the walls. He’s resting both closed fists on the counter now, his back turned midway in Shiro’s direction. He’s obviously still unhappy, but Shiro knows that he’s too stubborn to be convinced otherwise in the moment. Maybe, in

time, he'll come around, but Shiro isn't naive enough to think that they'll make any headway with this argument tonight.

"Humans can be monsters," Keith says slowly, so quiet that his voice mingles momentarily with the shadows crawling in the walls and the rodents and insects that they share that home with, "Humans feel sad so they can remember how to be happy… so… do they act like monsters so they can remember how to be human?"

Keith's eyes turn to him then, hollowed in the blackness with pupils so wide and blown out that his sclera stain with them. His translucent skin, as it so often does after a good meal, seems to glow in the dark. He's looking at Shiro now as though he's expecting an answer, and Shiro clears his throat, unable to avoid the smile that spreads out over his lips despite the hand that rises to cover it.

"What exactly happened on your date tonight?"

"It wasn't a date."

Shiro breathes a laugh, drawing nearer to the kitchen. His socked foot falls creak on the uneven boards beneath the carpet. His muscles ache with exhaustion, his eyes feel tired, and he wishes that he could curl up on their blanket pile on the floor and sleep, but Keith continues looking at him for a long moment. He turns his gaze then to the tile. The sudden annoyance in his features, inspired by Shiro's adamance to continue mislabeling his outing with Lance as a "date" (which is apparently absolutely *not* what he'd call it), ebbs away.

"He brought me to see his parents' graves. He's sentimental. He said that people have to feel sad so they can remember how to be happy. He started crying. I didn't know what to do."

"You didn't…" Shiro's steps falter. He stalls in place and his arm drops down, loosely and rubbery at his side. "You didn't leave him alone there, did you..?"

Keith shakes his head. The wild mop of glossy black hair framing his cheeks ruffles, falling between his eyes.

"He's home now. I don't know why he brought me there, but… it hurt."

His hand rises to clutch at the t-shirt draped over his chest. His fingers tug at the fabric, his brows drop low and draw close together.

“It hurt right here, in my chest. I felt… sad for him. I’m not warm or soft. I’m not human and I don’t know how to act like one, but… He was crying and I wanted to make him feel better. I don’t know why he brought me there, or why it felt that way, but… I haven’t felt like that since I met… *you* .”

His eyes rise again, glassy even in the dark. His bottom lip juts out, quivers between the sharp canines that frame it. He’s trembling softly. He looks so small, stunted and vulnerable and so confused in the blank black of their lightless, empty kitchen. Shiro’s feet carry him forward, close enough, soon, to reach out and snake an arm around him. Keith allows himself to be pulled in and cradled to Shiro’s chest. He can’t breathe, even disjointedly, and he doesn’t cry. But he shakes, until he doesn’t. He stands still for a long silent moment as Shiro’s body heat warms him up.

“It hurt because you care about him,” Shiro says gently, tender and hushed with his lips pressed into Keith’s unruly hair, “He brought you there because he cares about you. And… I’m happier because I met you, and him. And I think he’ll be happier too, someday. Because of us. We can make him happy.”

Another scoff, and Keith shoves away. He rubs a hand over his face and eases back, like a cat suddenly overwhelmed by too much love at once. Which, Shiro knows, is probably exactly what’s just happened.

“You said there was a woman,” Keith says then, deftly changing the subject to something that Shiro knows must feel safer for him right now.

But he sighs anyway, and the memories itch at the back of his skull. He’d won this round and outsmarted her, but he knows that she’s still too close for comfort. She’s working covertly without the approval of her bosses, but for how long? How much longer can he abate someone so determined, before she’s given some reason to strike? How much does she know already, and where does that leave them? How much danger is Lance in because of him? How stupid would it be for the three of them to continue staying here long enough for Lance to feel comfortable leaving this place behind?

“Yeah,” he breathes, pinching the bridge of his nose, “Detective Sanda. She doesn’t know everything, I don’t think, but… she knows that something’s going on. She suspects that I’m responsible for it. She asked about Lance, too, so we might have been sloppier than we realized.”

Keith isn't looking at him, but focusing his attention further into the shadows of the apartment. With a hand on his chin and still, unmoving features, he mulls over the information that Shiro has given him. Shiro watches him, too. He watches the subtle twitch of his brow and his lips pressed tightly together. He watches the way that his spider-leg lashes brush the apples of his high cheeks when he blinks. Keith turns to him yet again, tipping his head to the side and regarding him with just enough devious interest that Shiro readies himself preemptively to reject whatever suggestion is just about to leave his mouth.

He isn't wrong, either. He barely conceals his laughter when Keith speaks again.

"Does she have a family? We could kill her too."

"I don't think that would really solve our problems, Keith."

Keith scowls, crossing his arms over his chest. He lowers his head in thought, worrying his bottom lip between the blunted edges of his front teeth, and Shiro remembers when he was younger, when he would cut himself with the fangs accidentally, without even seeming to realize that it was supposed to hurt, or how he should have reacted to pain. He wonders if Keith realizes how much he's grown and become domesticated, if he might look back at those memories of his former self and feel regret or embarrassment, or even a thankfulness that he's no longer that person anymore.

Shiro has a hard time pinning down exactly what might be flitting through Keith's mind even on the best days, and he'd be hard-pressed to guess it accurately now. To know with certainty if he might feel that his life would be easier without all of these human politics and red tape, if they wouldn't even be in this predicament in the first place had Shiro been more willing to allow him to maim as he's so predisposed to maim.

It doesn't matter now, and Keith seems to have dismissed the concept of worrying over it too much for the time being. Outside, through the slivers of window where the adhesive has rolled up, Shiro can see that the sun is slowly beginning to rise, and he's sure that Keith is eager to rest now that he's spent the night adventuring with Lance. Keith wanders into the living room again, fiddling with the cot that they've spread out on the floor. He climbs onto it and tucks himself under the blankets wordlessly, his eyelids dropping lower as he waits for Shiro to join him.

Shiro strips his shirt and his scrub pants and socks. He shivers in the fresh cold of the apartment and takes the few short steps to the cot before sliding inside as well. He wraps an arm around Keith's body, resisting the urge to pull away when met with the chill of his skin, like pulling an ice pack closer and concentrating it on a bump or scrape, he imagines that Keith might be able to soothe the worry that still aches inside of him.

He can see now that just these few days without a proper meal are already beginning to affect Keith's appearance. His hair has flattened somewhat, dulled and tangled and dried out as it's been known to do in the past. His soft skin is flakier, like the soil in the potted plants at the hospital when the receptionist forgets to water them for too long. His eyes are darker and less polished, deader, maybe. He looks dried out. He looks less human than he did just a few nights ago.

He presses his nose to Keith's scalp, breathes in once sharply. Keith still smells like the shampoo that he'd massaged into his hair after they'd dumped Sendak's body. And he smells of that and nothing else, which by now, after all these years, doesn't come as a surprise. He's still now, doll-like as he ever has been, but Shiro can sense that he's getting hungrier. He eases back, shuffling awkwardly under the blankets and atop the thin layer of comforters that they've amassed for their bedding. Keith's eyelids raise up again, revealing the thick black of twin irises. There are faint shadows just beginning to blossom under his eyes again. He looks tired, looks like he'd love nothing more than to rest. But Shiro knows that he's hungry. He knows that he'll only continue to deteriorate the longer that he goes without more blood.

He offers Keith his wrist, slow and careful, presses it close to Keith's lips in an attempt to be as clear and concise with his actions as possible without the need for too many words.

Keith's eyes ignore the wrist and focus only on his face, instead. His brows lower, tension rises between them. He pokes out his tongue and drags it over his lips.

"Eat," Shiro tells him, "Just a little. Just enough to tide you over until we can find something else."

Keith watches him for a moment wordlessly. He doesn't give any indication that he's heard him or that he's considering his words, but after some time passes, he opens his lips, prodding his teeth lightly against the junction of Shiro's wrist into his palm and putting the

slightest amount of pressure down into the skin there.

It isn't enough to hurt yet, and the push of fangs into flesh, then muscle and bone, is slow enough that Shiro eases himself more comfortably into the familiar sensation and the sting of it. He watches as Keith drinks from him, breathes in sharply as Keith's warm tongue blots the dribble of blood. Keith's leg under the blankets sneaks forward, too, unexpected as it sets itself atop his own and tugs forward. But Shiro gets the message loud and clear: that Keith wants him closer, and while he doesn't have another arm to wrap around him, while he can't embrace him as fully as he might want to, he makes the best of it. He rests his lips again atop Keith's head, allows his eyes to drop closed and concentrates instead on the feeling of Keith's mouth on his wrist.

Keith stops just as he begins to feel lightheaded. With one last swipe of that wet tongue over the tiny, twin lacerations, he eases back, and Shiro pulls back his head to look down at him as well.

They stare at each other then, quiet and devoid of any level of communication. Shiro feels relieved by the color that rises into Keith's cheeks, no matter how minuscule, and the light that's captured in his eyes. He's grateful for the slow rise of life pooling Keith's being, the sensation of their connection grown stronger once again.

Keith doesn't thank him and he doesn't apologize and he mentions nothing about how he must have known to pull away when he did. There's blood, glossy and scarlet, on his teeth and open lips. He's so motionless that it feels as though Shiro is only staring at a photograph of a person, skewed in monochrome, dusty and aged and long forgotten at the bottom of a box.

But Keith isn't quite as blown away by the view as he is, apparently. He moves quickly, and in a flash of a moment too fast to catch up with, his lips are pressed to Shiro's lips, his hands are roaming Shiro's chest, feeling the indentations of muscle there, the deep webbing of old scars, the dip of his navel into the waistband of his underwear, and the embarrassing tent of something stiff under the fabric that he'd hoped that Keith wouldn't notice, or at least, wouldn't mention or regard tonight as he's always been so good about ignoring it.

But Keith's fingers find it. Keith's lips find the juncture of his throat into his shoulder. The teeth don't press hard enough to draw blood this time, but he can feel the pricks of those fangs, finds himself riveted by the danger of allowing Keith this close when he's already

lost a lot of blood. Keith palms him through his underwear, tug him through the slot in the front. It's been a long time for both of them. Shiro unfolds in fervent desperation. Keith touches him with languid, long strokes and nibbles on his skin, and Shiro cages moans behind tightly-closed teeth, feeling as though he's walking a tightrope now, as though he might ruin this surprising, wonderful development if he makes the wrong move.

Keith's fingers close firmer around him and his strokes gain purpose, moving in such a way that Shiro feels hot tremors fanning out from his belly, over his skin, curling his toes and rising more noises in his throat that are harder to contain than before.

And Keith's voice against his neck vibrates there, feels chilled and strange, devoid of a breath to accompany it. He whispers to Shiro, "I want to hear you."

And Shiro's brows furrow, his head drops back. His fingers grasp at Keith's arm, the stinging in his wrist all but forgotten. He keens lowly, breath stilted and shallow, his sounds embarrassing and choppy as they fill the quiet and the dark, and the empty of their small apartment bathed only in the most minute hues of the sunrise beyond the blacked-out windows.

He finishes soon after, too soon, maybe. But his body spreads with the warm tingles of his orgasm. He feels contented and so happy and so overfilled with emotion that it takes a substantial amount of effort not to cry.

Keith is gone for only a moment to clean the mess. Shiro listens to the hissing of the bathroom sink, to Keith's almost silent footfalls. His eyes crack open as Keith slides back against him, tucking himself under the blanket and barely warm, still heated from the blanket and Shiro's body heat, still comfortable and soft and revitalized from his meal despite it.

He kisses Shiro again, and Shiro lazily, tiredly, kisses back.

He doesn't ask what he's done to deserve this, doesn't question it or address it in fear of making the wrong move.

But he holds Keith closer anyway, falls asleep to the feeling of Keith's still body slotted with his like a piece of himself long lost, finally clicking back into place.

He never gets a chance to ask about that date again, but he thanks

Lance privately in his thoughts.

And he hopes that someday, they can all experience this sort of thing together. That someday, Lance will be another body warming Keith up as the sun rises gradually outside.

It still feels like a lot to ask for. It still feels like he's hoping for too much from a life that thus far has only hurt and disappointed and drawn out so much longer than it should have, endlessly, with no hope of ever escaping it.

But the sun is on the horizon, too, he knows.

Things are getting better slowly.

Someday, maybe, everything will be okay.

Keith will find a place for himself. Lance will remember how to be happy.

And Shiro won't find himself so bridled with his guilt, the consequences of his shortcomings.

The feeling of undeservedness that stains even nice moments like these.

Chapter 18

Lance shoves his hands in his coat pockets, folding as inwardly as he can possibly manage to shield himself from the cold wind beating against his front as he walks. It's overcast today and the sun is already beginning to set just beyond the tips of the leafless, dark trees. It still hasn't snowed since Christmas, but tonight is New Year's Eve, and Veronica warned him earlier that they'll be ringing in the new year with what's supposed to be the heaviest snowfall since the beginning of winter. She'd cautioned for him to take his old high school backpack with him to work today, if only so he could shove a water bottle and some snacks inside, just in case. Accompanied by his phone charger and a few odds and ends that she'd offered him from the first aid kit beneath the bathroom sink before she'd left for work. He'd laughed at her then, felt compelled to keep things as lighthearted as possible as he still didn't feel the urge to divulge to her what he'd learned from those curious texts on her forgotten phone just a few days prior.

She'd left soon after, making him promise that he'd call her on his first break, that he'd actually take the bag with him and that he'd be careful. But he woke up late and now he's in a rush to walk to the convenience store before his shift starts. And he's slipping just a little on the snow and melting ice, on the brown sludge collected in the gutters where he walks to stay out of the wilted, soggy grass and dangerous streets. He's already in a sour mood tonight, already feeling like he'd love nothing more than to go home and take another extended nap. All of the lost sleep accumulated over the last few months is slowly beginning to catch up to him, and he's in desperate need of a well-timed crash.

For now, he concentrates on getting to work. He still feels tired after his nap, but he's awake enough that he should be able to make it through his first shift without dozing off between customers. Later on, however, he isn't so sure that he'll be able to survive the eight hours of his janitor duties without supplementing his sleep earlier with a few micro-naps between. But it's safe enough, anyway, since even the clubs and the winter tutoring students and the most dedicated teachers won't be in tomorrow for the holiday, and the regular student body won't be present for another week until Christmas break is finally over.

He doesn't have to work too hard tonight because there probably

won't be that big of a mess to begin with. He wonders if he'll be spoiled by the slowness at his second job once regular classes resume, if he might feel overwhelmed and even more eager to get a move on leaving if only so he can shove these looming, daunting tasks off onto someone else.

The thought of quitting sooner than later only manages to raise another pressing matter in his thoughts: how should he go about putting in his notice? He feels guilty already, when he considers leaving Hunk hanging at the convenience store one night, totally unprompted with nothing but unanswered texts on a cell phone that he'll surely be forced to leave behind with no warning whatsoever. It hurts just a little, considering abandoning the only real friend that he's ever managed to keep from grade school to high school and well beyond graduation. He feels shitty for keeping so many secrets from him. He knows that Hunk has other friends and he'll surely be okay, but it still just… sucks. Thinking about being a mystery that Hunk won't ever be able to solve, a phantom gone away in the night like fog faded in black air. Hunk won't ever know where he went off to. Hunk won't ever be provided with closure or an explanation or an apology. He can't, Lance knows this.

He knows that it would only put Hunk in needless danger if he involved him. He knows that Hunk might not believe him anyway. He knows that this secrecy and deception and endless hiding out only works if every moving part performs accordingly. He knows that Shiro must have known *someone* before he died or disappeared or whatever his friends and family were left with after he went away, and Shiro's never mentioned telling anyone else. Shiro talks about the past in a distant, pragmatic way. Like a spectator who'd chosen to flip the channel to something more interesting. He doesn't live in regret for a life or a family or a loving group of friends that he might have left behind.

Shiro doesn't hesitate, not how Lance is hesitating now.

Shiro is absolute, and he's determined. And he does the hard things when they need to be done, but…

Could Lance ever even be that person?

Could he be strong enough to leave this life behind without letting anyone know what happened to him?

Beyond Veronica, and the kids, and Hunk, the middle school had a

hard enough time filling the janitor position at such a troublesome, inconvenient shift that they'd settled for him right after he'd graduated from high school. He had nothing on his resume but a single summer that he mowed lawns and a flimsy two months that he'd done some charity recycling plastic bottles for a student project in his economy class. He'd had no references but his own sister and Dr. Smythe, her boss. They'd taken him in anyway, and he feels like that must count for something. He's indebted to them in the form of owing them at least a single warning that he might leave soon, which… he won't even be able to pull off, no matter how desperately he might want to.

Maybe he could get fired, he thinks, but the idea of performing poorly enough to get booted makes him feel even worse. This job is easy enough that he could probably sleep through most of his shift and still get by just fine. The morning crew keeps things tidy enough for him that simply mopping the floors each night and wiping down the windows, then buffing everything once per week takes up the vast majority of his time. He isn't even sure if he could screw up badly enough that his boss would think to fire him before time runs out. He isn't sure if that would be worse than just failing to continue showing up, or if perhaps he just needs to stop getting so stuck on the finer details and focus instead on the big picture. On the idea of finally leaving with Keith and Shiro. Of how nice it'll feel to be unshackled by this place, to feel warm beach sand between his toes, to discover if Shiro can still get a tan, to learn what parts of ocean nights have apparently beguiled Keith in the past.

He's considering how it might look to see Keith's pale face framed in the soft blue hues of ocean water, how it might feel like watching the reflection of the moon on the surface each time that he finds his eyes drawn to Keith's luminous skin, when he feels the warmth and tight firmness of something weighted suddenly propped on his shoulder—totally out of nowhere, completely unexpected and so surprising that, for a moment, he's frozen in panic as his mind rushes through everything that might have fallen on him while he wasn't paying attention. This time, he can't stop himself from crying out and whipping around, stumbling back a few inches and extending his arms in front of him defensively but sloppily, knowing deep down that if anyone is trying to mug him or hurt him now, he's absolutely, positively screwed.

Keith will still be asleep for a couple of hours until the sun dips well below the horizon and the darkness settles fully enough over this sleepy town that he'll be free to crawl through the woods unnoticed

and uninterrupted by any unassuming humans. Shiro has probably just left for work, probably just recently gotten dressed and packed his things and driven to the hospital. The road around Lance is devoid of passing cars or slow-moving pedestrians. The wiry trees and the houses only slightly obscured through their skeletons are empty and the lights inside are turned off. He feels dreadfully by himself when he realizes how no eyes are here to witness this scene: him, scrambling around clumsily to defend himself against this unknown assailant while his muddy thoughts pop desperately like some kind of haphazardly cobbled-together grandfather clock drowned in molasses. This person, who in this millisecond hasn't cleared enough in his stress-blurred eyes to be recognizable, dropping their hand and skirting back a few inches as though they're actually afraid that he'll grow the balls to hit them.

But he realizes belatedly, with his heart pounding entirely too fervently for reasonable thought to catch up with his instincts quicker, that he doesn't have anything to be afraid of. The person who touched his shoulder, who has now reeled back and is staring at him with wide, surprised eyes and a slack jaw, is not someone who he's been given any reason to be fearful of so far. Yeah, maybe she weirded him out at the convenience store a few days ago, but she's relatively harmless as far as he's been led to believe in the past. And she's a cop, too, as far as he knows, and his urge to trust the police overcomes his realization that there's not a good reason for her to be following him out here. He tries to convince himself that he's safe because he hasn't done anything wrong that the police would even know about. As far as the police force is aware, he's totally uninvolved in anything elicit or particularly damning. He's just a bystander. He definitely isn't friends with a vampire and his weird, hunky, immortal servant. He definitely hasn't been planning to run away with both of them for weeks now.

He sucks in a deep breath, combing a hand through his hair. He straightens his stance, pushing out a shuddered, breathless laugh as color warms his cheeks.

"Sorry, ma'am, you scared me," he tells her, "Is… is something wrong? Did you need something?"

It takes her a moment longer to regain her composure, but the frown that spreads out over her face and creases the wrinkles in her forehead and framing her lips is far more familiar than the shock that she'd worn just seconds ago.

She fumbles with the front of her coat, unzipping halfway to her belly and tugging out the edge, revealing a shimmering badge fastened to the inside pocket. She levels him with an even but still intimidating and stern look before she drops the edge of her coat back to rest against her chest.

“You can call me Detective Sanda,” she tells him, “I just have a few questions to ask you, if this isn’t a bad time.”

He doesn’t even know how the Hell she found him out here, because this surely isn’t the most well-traveled path from the complex to his work. It’s the quietest one, which is generally why he takes it, but most reasonable people would take the main road. For one thing, it has sidewalks, and it’s brighter and faster and the roads are cleaned and salted more regularly. It’s the safer option even though this town might have previously boasted the lowest crime rates in the state. It’s less likely that he’d be grabbed and mauled by some bloodthirsty cougar coming down from its post-Officer-maiming high if he took that path. But he sacrifices the convenience for the tranquility, and even on days like these, when he’s already running late, his muscle memory moves naturally and he almost forgets that there’s a more viable route that, given his predicament, probably would have been the smarter choice.

So he’s stunned for a moment, wondering how she even knew to find him here, or if for some reason she was just in the area, even though this area admittedly has nothing of interest to offer anyone but the people who live and work on the farmland here.

He spares a short glance around the street. Just a little ways away, he recognizes the firm iron gates of the factory where his father used to work. Down a straight, rocky path, there’s a barn circled by office buildings. There’s a vast array of different structures housing different parts of the business, and he can never remember which building must have once been his father’s daily work destination, even if he actually cared enough to recall that sort of information or felt the need to, either.

But Sanda surely neither came to case that factory or just left from it. She doesn’t smell like the overpowering odor of animal manure and her pants aren't lined with the mud or dust that she would have been caked with had she been prowling around out there. The factory can easily be marked from the list, which leaves only the scarce amount of homes scattered on this path from this place, where he stands, and his destination just a little less than a mile away.

There are two houses on this block with their own extensive acreage. He knows that the closest home to him now—an aged farmhouse with peeling white paint and a droopy chainlink fence dotted with faded "Beware of Dog" signs hung with zip ties from the bars—belongs to an elderly man who picks up propane containers by the dozen every few months from the gas station. He knows that the other—a quant and curiously pink-painted home with cute flower boxes hanging from each of the front windows that occupies an impressive plot of land just a little further up—belongs to a farmer whose wife Veronica works with at Dr. Smythe's office. At the narrow mouth of this unpaved road, there's a small smattering of other homes with less property, and maybe Detective Sanda spotted him through her window in her home there, but he isn't familiar enough with the law to know whether she's allowed to introduce herself with her badge if she's off the clock or not. And he definitely doesn't trust that she'd be allowed to question him in the middle of the street like this, but… he also can't think of a single reason why it would be dangerous either.

Even though he appears to be completely alone out here, he doesn't think that someone like Detective Sanda would be stupid enough to assault him while the sun is out and anyone could pass by them at any moment. He doesn't remember hearing anything notable about her as one of the police force from the papers or word-of-mouth. He can't recall ever being aware of her more than just knowing that she exists here, seeing her fleetingly in the convenience store, and perhaps catching a mention of her name listed in the papers from parades and police bake sales, and a number of mundane, small town goings on that definitely don't allude to her being a dirty cop by any means.

He feels like he's making a dumb decision when he doesn't immediately turn heel and walk away, but his need to be polite overcomes his discomfort. He scratches nervously at the nape of his neck, swallowing hard and allowing his gaze to trail further up the street, to the bend that will lead him down another winding path, until eventually this road lets out onto the highway, and he'll be able to cross at the stoplight in order to reach the convenience store parking lot. *Maybe* , if he hurries, just in time.

"I—I'm running late," he tells her, "Would it be okay if we walked while we talk?"

She purses her lips for a moment, as though she's mentally chewing on the idea of telling him that she's in no way willing to do that for him. But she breathes out sharply instead, pocketing her hands and flicking her gaze from his face to the road ahead of them.

“Would you like a ride instead?” She asks him, admittedly far less hostile than he might have expected, given her general disposition, “My car is parked just a little further back. I wouldn’t mind assisting you if you’d be willing to answer my questions.”

This, of course, suddenly reminds Lance of all of the stranger danger stories that he’d heard in his youth. Of older men in windowless vans promising kids that he had puppies or candy or games inside for them. Of adults trying to coax children into vulnerable positions, milk carton kids and American’s Most Wanted. He’s spent decades now raised on stories told of children put in positions just like this one, but he isn’t a child anymore. He isn’t small or helpless or fragile. He isn’t sure if he could take down most people on the police force, but this detective is an older woman. She’s old enough to be his mom’s age, had his mom lived this long. He doesn’t hate the odds that he has of escaping her, if he needs to. He isn’t stupid enough to think that a detective would potentially throw away her entire career just to attack him out of nowhere, with no clear motivation to do so.

He spares a look at his watch, which is inevitably the deciding factor. There’s no way that he’ll make it on time if he keeps walking. It’s another ten minutes to the convenience store on foot, and he only has five to spare.

He sighs. This is a bad idea, but it’s the only idea that he has right now.

“Uh, okay, sure. Yeah, that would be great.”

Sanda’s car, once they reach it, is parked in an abandoned gravel parking lot that at one point, long before Lance can remember, housed a video rental store, a beauty salon, and a phone store all lined on the same narrow strip. He can still make out the faintest outlines of faded posters in the windows, can still discern the loopy letters and lightbulbs long knocked out just above the salon. It must have read “Luscious Locks” at one point, but the L’s have been broken off. The rusted bodies of the letters are bent in odd directions. The windows are caked in thick dust and smudged with rain spots. He doesn’t know if the lights were broken by Keith or bored teenagers. He feels an eerie sense of foreboding creeping up his spine when he’s led here, feels as though this decrepit scene drawn out before him is forbidden to the human eye. Derelict and long-abandoned, a sarcophagus of a past that this town has tried to forget, of days when people still rented movies. Of a time when women still wore their hair piled up in beehives. Of a page in time’s book folded over and torn out and left to fester here

accompanied only by gravel that's uneven and well overdue for a touch-up and Sanda's sleek car placed jarringly in the center of everything.

Like a burn hole in the middle of a blank sheet of paper, like a black hole materialized in the center of the sun.

Her vehicle is a plain, glossy black two-door, unmarked as a police car. Innocuous but perhaps just a little bit too nice to fit in very well among the dirt and rusted vehicles that many others drive in a town like this, where nothing stays clean for very long.

She unlocks the doors with a button on her keys, and Lance compartmentalizes his nerves as he slides into the passenger's seat. The interior of the car is lined in pristine leather. It smells like the slightest hints of old lady perfume. There's a thick, glossy book placed in the floor by his feet. It's a library rental, he can recognize the big, yellow sticker stuck on the cover. He studies it while he closes the door and clicks his seatbelt into its slot. *Bats* . He tips his head to the side. He wonders if she's really so interested in zoology that she'd be willing to read through a book that thick.

Sanda joins him in the driver's seat soon after. She buckles her own seatbelt and slots her key into the hole. The car is quiet when it starts up. It doesn't sputter or roar and the heating clicks on so silently that he only recognizes it by the warmth suddenly covering his feet. The windows are tinted and nothing is stained or worn or cracked. It's nicer than any car that he's been inside in a very long time. It's nicer than any car that he could ever hope to afford, if he could save more than a few hundred dollars each year just to buy the kids' Christmas presents.

Dr. Smythe, some time ago, bought a fancy environmentally friendly vehicle that he took Lance for a ride in one day when Veronica worked late, and in the rain, in fear of making Lance walk home by himself in inclimate weather, Dr. Smythe offered instead to swing by on his break and drive him home. Lance had left finger smudges on the glass and clicked the little button that turned the windows up and down incessantly. He'd tracked mud over the expensive mats that were placed custom on the floor, spilled juice in the seat that never managed to wash out completely. But the doctor liked kids, liked their family and extended a kind hand to them in any way that Veronica would allow for him to. The doctor simply tutted and laughed and accepted Lance's abuse of his new car with patience and understanding that still startles Lance to this day. He's always had

nice things that he eagerly shares with others. He's always been happy to make room in his life for the things and the people who really matter to him.

Sanda, on the other hand, seems like the kind of person who already abhors having someone else in her space. She rolls her window down despite the chill outside, turns her face towards it as though she's airing out a particularly nasty smell. Lance tries to be subtle when he takes a moment to stiff his shirt. He doesn't feel like he's particularly ripe today, he showered earlier. He put on deodorant and the smallest hint of cologne. He tries not to let it bother him, tries to convince himself that he's just reading into things too deeply when maybe Sanda just likes to shove her head out of her car window like some kind of deranged humanoid dog everywhere that she goes.

When the car starts, the radio stays silent. Dr. Smythe decorated his own car with silly bumper stickers. He hung a lanyard that Lance had made out of beads at some middle school craft fair from the rearview mirror. But this car, now, is devoid of personality. It's uniform and professional, pristine and empty sans for the book on the floor and a faded folder stuffed with documents that rests in the backseat, that Lance catches sight of in the rearview mirror when he glances up again. Lance can't discern any characteristics from this interior. He feels even more on edge, as a person might, he thinks, as they sit waiting for test results in a bland, white-washed hospital waiting room. He feels like he's been put on trial, suddenly. He feels like he'd be exponentially more at ease if there were juice stains or smudge fingerprints present here, as though humanizing this woman who's successfully corraled him alone into her car would somehow make this situation any less consequential.

They pull out of the parking lot gradually, the gravel underneath the wheels crackling and dust floating up into the air around them. Lance bites his lip as they slide into the barren street, feeling suddenly as though he's made a wrong decision somewhere along the way, but knowing with a deep dread boiling in his belly that it's far too late to turn back now. He watches the green digits on the radio's digital clock flip, five minutes to four left. Time is running out quicker than he can get to work, and he's probably going to be late regardless. His boss won't be happy, but maybe Hunk will be more considerate. Lance had covered for him yesterday when he'd come into work nursing a massive hangover thanks to the party the night before, so it's only fair that he extend the same consideration to Lance, now, especially since he won't be tardy by much. Especially since it's slow enough even on their busiest days that it rarely warrants two cashiers on staff.

The detective's fingers drum against the steering wheel. He opens his mouth to speak to her, to ask how things are going or what brings her to this specific area, but the first thing that leaves his mouth is, "So Detective Sandra—" which he realizes only a fraction of a second later isn't actually her real name. She's clearly put off by his misstep as soon as that rogue *R* leaves his lips and she narrows her eyes, gripping the steering wheel tighter in her fingers. He claps his mouth shut just after, swallowing hard and ducking his head and pretending that she isn't close enough to see the scalding color that bubbles up under his cheeks.

For a few tense moments, they're quiet. Lance can't help but feel just a little bit reassured that he isn't in any danger, since she didn't lash out when he misnamed her. Since they're drawing nearer to the convenience store now, and if he really needed to, he could easily jump from this slow-moving car and sprint the last few blocks between the trees where she couldn't easily mow him down without getting stuck.

He breathes in and out, and he jerks slightly, caught off guard by the sound of her voice when she finally speaks. He feels suddenly put on the spot and overwhelmed and even more regretful that he decided to idiotically step into this vehicle in the first place when his brain belatedly catches up with her words.

"I assume that you're aware of the case surrounding Officer Sendak. Did your friend, Ryou, tell you that we interviewed him?"

Lance's breath stalls and his heart feels as though it might beat so hard that it'll implode between his rib bones. He clasps his shaking, clammy hands together, biting the inside of his cheek and focusing his blurry gaze on the bat book on the floor. His knees are knocking together slightly as he tremors, but he tries to remember how to be sneaky. How to be vague as Shiro has so often been vague with him in the past—impenetrable but still polite, still responding as though neither of them had known about his secrets even as Lance had once questioned him relentlessly about Keith and their shared past, while safe in the realization that common decency and general politeness would inhibit Lance from asking any of the questions that he so needed answered quite as clearly as he'd have to in order to break the mold of their so-often circular conversations.

"I read about it in the papers," Lance tells her then, quiet and careful, his voice unwavering but weighted by nervousness that he can't squash no matter how brave he tries to convince himself that he

secretly might be, “It’s really terrible, what happened, but… is there really a *case* ? Wasn’t it just a cougar or something?”

He thinks about Shiro’s soft voice on the phone that night, how the sound of his words had hummed in a calming, serene and peaceful way. The melodious buzz of Shiro’s crackling voice on the line had been supplemented by the whirr of the floor buffer and that combination had eased Lance into a contented feeling of exhaustion, exacerbated only by the slow creep of tiredness that had already been following him since he woke up earlier in the evening for his convenience store shift.

He thinks about how dangerous Keith might be, how he’d apparently managed to maim that officer to the point that authorities had only been able to identify him by a few subtle characteristics that his peers at the station had recognized. Later came the dental records. Later came the autopsy. He’d heard no news about either of those, the papers had kept mentions of the case to a minimum. But he didn’t need affirmation to know for sure. He didn’t need any DNA tests or dental identification to know for sure exactly who that dried husk of a corpse used to be before he’d stumbled into the web of the most deadly spider that he’d meet before he died.

He hopes that the detective can’t read that in his expression now: that he knows. He knows more than she could ever understand. And he knows the man who watched Sendak’s bones snap and his blood leak, the man who knows the sight of Sendak’s empty eyes opening in agony and fear, who knows how the dark must have ebbed back to drag him in. How the tendrils of black would have splintered cartilage and mangled flesh and contorted Sendak’s body in directions that no human could survive before ripping him to shreds. How loud those whispers must have hissed and the muscle must have torn as a monster mutilated him just outside of that bar.

Sanda doesn’t respond for a while, but finally, she flicks her gaze in his direction for a fraction of a moment. She purses her lips, breathing in briefly and sharply and tapping her index finger against the steering wheel once again.

“Are you implying that you have no relationship with Ryou Yamazaki?”

Lance resists the urge to cough or to clear his throat. To choke or laugh or make any noise but to sit here silently for a moment instead, as though he’s mulling over her words and trying to understand

exactly what they mean. Eventually, he tuts, combing a hand through his hair and leaning back more comfortably against the seat.

Shiro would have told him if he had a special script or alibi for him to recite from. He would have warned him if, for any reason, he thought that Sanda might come after him for answers as well. But Lance hasn't heard from him lately, hasn't had the time to make a phone call and came home entirely too late and emotionally exhausted the other night to spare a short visit to their usual meeting spot after Keith returned to the apartment. Shiro understands anyway, Lance knows. He'd expected prior that they wouldn't have time to hang out, and for all that Lance knows, he probably enjoyed relaxing in the warmth of his apartment as well.

He shakes his head.

"He lives in my apartment complex," he tells her, "I've talked to him a couple of times, but… I don't know him well. I don't—I mean, I remember that… you told me to watch out for him, but I don't really know him well enough to understand why you'd warned me."

He laughs then, manufacturing a smile that he focuses through the windshield, filled with relief when he sees the convenience store creeping slowly closer and closer, just one cross of the highway away now. He's almost there. He only has to keep this up for a little bit longer.

Then he can compose himself. He can work the rest of his shift here, tonight, and trudge through his janitorial work later on. And he can meet up with Keith or Shiro after he's done and tell them exactly what's been going on—no more being strong for them, no more staying willfully ignorant. He can tell that things are getting only more serious now. He can see clearly that they're running out of time.

Ignoring it won't help anyone, he understands that now. He places a hand on the buckle of his seatbelt preemptively, vying to jump from the car the moment that Sanda puts it in park. To get the Hell out of this situation under the guise of being late, to escape this before he slips up and ruins everything.

Just a few more seconds. They're waiting for a car to pass in front of them. He watches in agony as it slows down, pulling into the convenience store parking lot and stalling their progress by a few more valuable microseconds.

"What does any of this have to do with a cougar attack anyway? Isn't

that, like… a pretty normal thing around here? I remember reading in the papers a few months ago about some guys who almost got mauled by one while they were hunting, right? And they had some pretty big guns. Officer Sendak was a big guy, yeah, but the papers said that he was pretty drunk and out in the middle of nowhere, right? Just right outside of town, so…"

He lets that statement trail off, feeling as though he's doing far less convincing of a job playing the fool as Shiro often has in the past. But he also knows, from his experiences being the pursuer in these situations with Shiro as well, that he has Sanda boxed anyway. Her options now are to coerce him by telling him exactly what she wants for him to say, in which case, she might sound crazy, she'll seem too pushy. She'll seem as though she isn't considering anything that he's said so far and that she's already made up her mind. Lance has already told her that he doesn't know Ryou. If she pushes that further, does she have proof? If Shiro had told her that he knew Lance, surely, she would have countered his previous claim with a firmly stated, "he said he knew you" already. If she had any aces up her sleeve, the time to pull them has passed. The car is moving again. She's almost out of time, and she's learned nothing. He's given not even an inch. He's almost there, if he can just hold her off for a little bit longer.

But she can also back off. She can chalk this up as a failure and wait until next time, when he knows with certainty that he won't get in the car again. She can come into his work, but that's far too public. She'll have to bring him in for an official investigation. He doesn't know if she even has the ability to do that or enough proof to tie him to any of the suspicions that she so clearly has.

But she chooses a third option that he hadn't considered before. She breaks the rules that Shiro set in place for him months ago. She doesn't tell him that she knows that he's lying. She doesn't accuse him of assisting a murderer or disposing of evidence or of any points on a long list of crimes currently tucked so secretly in the back of his mind.

She doesn't choose from a lengthy roster of arguments that Lance has already prepared for her to say.

She doesn't play fair.

She makes it personal.

"Do you think your parents would be proud of you if they knew that you were consorting with a person like that? Do you think they'd

approve of your relationship with a man like Ryou Yamazaki? Your father was a good man, an honest, hardworking man. He would have been disgusted to learn that his youngest son became a criminal."

The front tires touch the asphalt of the convenience store parking lot. Lance's fingers snap open the clasp of his seatbelt, his hands jitter, his heart pounds hard and unforgiving and so violently in his chest. His eyes widen and his breath sticks in his throat. He tears his head around to gape at her, and in a flash of a moment, he doesn't feel sad, he doesn't feel guilty, he isn't scared.

He sees red.

The door flies open and Lance barely registers that he's stepped out of a still-moving car. Sanda scrambles to pump the brakes, and she's so owlish when she stares at him that it's almost funny. He grasps the edge of the door in a white-knuckled, shaking fist. He feels so pumped with adrenaline now that he wonders if he could actually break the door from its hinges, just to exhibit even an ounce of his sudden Hulk-like rage.

The tears sprung to the corners of his eyes are deceptive. The way that he shakes and stands on unsteady feet does little to express the spitting sparks of a brush fire suddenly ignited in his chest.

"Don't you *dare* —don't you *ever* fucking talk about my parents like that! It's none of your business, got it?! They have nothing to do with my life now, *they're dead* . They're dead and they can't see me, they aren't here, they have *nothing* to do with any of this. I don't know that f-fucking Ryou guy. Stop asking me about him! I don't know him! I told you that I don't know him a—and I—I don't wanna see you around here again. Leave me alone, stop following me. Stay the fuck away from me."

The door slams. Lance stomps from the mouth of the parking lot and tears open the door of the convenience store so harshly that the bells overhead are nearly knocked from the top of it. Hunk jumps at the sound and the sight of him. He drops the stack of lighters that he was placing in a new display. His eyes are rounded and his mouth drops agape. He shuffles to his feet clumsily and skitters forward, too tall and solid to accommodate the fretful terror suddenly screwing up his features, but far too possessed with his sudden concern to notice how many items he's knocked from the shelves in his clumsy journey from the front counter to where Lance stands in the entrance of the store.

“D-dude, are you okay? Jesus Lance, what happened? You look like you just got in a fight or something. Your hand’s bleeding, man, holy crap, come here—”

He grasps Lance’s shaking hand in his and turns it gently to inspect the long gash across his palm. Lance feels like he’s been pumped with live electricity and it’s nearly impossible to stay still long enough to allow Hunk to give him this once-over. He stares down at the jagged gash in his palm, numbed to the pain of it and feeling only the prickly sensation of something not quite right there. He looks at the way that the blood bubbles up and collects in the creases. He wonders how delicious a sight like this might look to Keith.

He must have scratched it on the edge of the door when he’d slammed it. He must have been so worked up back there that he didn’t even notice where he was placing his hand, and hadn’t realized that grabbing at any part of the car while it was still pushing forward might not have been the smartest idea. His legs ache too, suddenly. He feels winded and his head throbs. The adrenaline rush eases away and leaves only discomfort and tiredness in its wake. Hunk takes him into the back room and swabs his hand with alcohol before patching up the wound with a tape-lined bandage.

It doesn’t look too bad, once Hunk finishes patching him up. It doesn’t hurt too much when he isn’t using it. Hunk frets over him for a few more hours before his shift ends, and Lance is left alone in the convenience store, mopping, first, as he toils away the last ten minutes of his shift. Then fixing the fallen chips and candy on the shelves, re-facing the limited amount of bandaids and rubbing alcohol that they have in the back, rearranging the ramen cups, distracted by the tingling in his palm and the heaviness of his heart, the tight pinch in his chest, and the feeling that he’s overfilled with too much of everything and there’s no opportunity right now to vent it.

He locks the doors soon after. It’s thick and motionless black outside, but he can’t shake the feeling that someone is watching him distantly, that there are eyes in the dark that he can’t see now, from his spot in this brightly lit storefront. He’s angry enough that it doesn’t bother him, distracted by his own thoughts conveniently as he cashes out the registers and puts away the till before collecting his things, donning his coat, and getting ready to make the short walk to the middle school for his second shift.

It’s comically convenient how his anger compels him forward fearlessly into the night after he locks up. He trudges through the dark

without a single thought about the dangers that linger outside. He can hear the whispers, but he barely addresses them, forgets that they aren't quite as commonplace when Keith isn't around and that perhaps he should be more concerned when hearing them in his absence. All that he can think of right now is that detective and how forward she'd been and how she'd lulled him into a false sense of security with that offer for a ride. How she'd then taken advantage of his naively trusting nature when he was vulnerable and in need of assistance, and how she'd had the audacity to say those things to him, of all things, as though she had any idea who he was or what he was going through, or how surprisingly relevant her words really were to everything that's been plaguing his thoughts lately.

The nerve of her, honestly, for thinking that she had any right to tell him whether or not his own parents would be proud of him now. Sure, maybe he had a lapse of faith back at the cemetery, maybe he'd had a moment of weakness in which he'd actually thought that his loving mother and proud, supportive father could have ever rejected him just because he'd done something that they didn't approve of. But Sanda didn't know how his mother used to tell him, "I'll love you no matter what", or how his father would sometimes say, "I'll always be proud of you, as long as you're doing what you think is right"—because what kind of parent always agrees with their child anyway? What kind of father always loves their kid's boyfriends? What type of mom doesn't ever have any doubts about the path that her child has taken?

And why did this woman, wholly unrelated to any part of his personal life, think that she had the right to tell him exactly what he's been so terrified of hearing all along?

Suddenly, the prospect of being a disappointment doesn't even seem so bad. Suddenly, he's almost wishing that his parents were alive now so that he could tell them, that he could wrap himself in his anger and pettiness and prove to stupid Detective Sanda that he'd be making this same regrettable series of decisions even if someone were actually here to hold him responsible.

He doesn't live his life to unflinchingly abide by the expectations that his parents might have once had for him, he realizes that as he walks. He lives his life to be happy, to be fulfilled and to leave someday, maybe, without regrets, and in that way...

Maybe that's how he honors them.

But Sanda had no way of knowing that. Sanda doesn't know him at

all. She has nothing to do with any of this. She had no business inserting herself in this narrative that should be entirely irrelevant to her.

No cars pass as he makes his way from the convenience store to the middle school. Darkness, as it so often does, looms heavy over the frigid world around him. He can't shake the feeling that someone is watching him, but he's still so riveted by his internal, angry monologue that he barely pays it any mind. He's colder here, walking, than he should be after getting himself so worked up. It's so chilly tonight that he's surprised that it hasn't already started snowing. It's not much longer until night becomes early morning, until the new year rings in and Lance finds himself entering January alone in the middle school, mopping the floors and toiling away until the end of his shift. He hopes that Shiro, at least, got to have an office party. He hopes that Keith is enjoying his night climbing through the dark trees.

He hopes that Sanda is spending the night alone, too, miserable and far too disturbed by his strong overreaction to her stupid, intrusive questions to sleep comfortably while bridled with the guilt that she should be feeling as a result of it.

He wishes that he had an easy way to reach Shiro. He wishes that he could talk to someone about everything that he's feeling right now. But he guiltily suspects that he might be relying on both of them too much lately, leaning on Keith for comfort when facing his parents, itching to talk to Shiro when he's feeling down. It's far too early in this almost relationship to already start becoming codependent. He needs to prove to them, and to himself, that he can actually stand firmly on his own two feet.

He's not someone who needs to be coddled constantly. He's strong enough for the lifestyle that they're offering him. He's solid enough to be like Shiro, to be somewhat of a guardian for Keith, and the bars of the cage standing between Keith and the human population, the only thing keeping this terrible secret from unleashing on the world as it must have once upon a time, and leaving whatever wreckage in its path that something like Keith is capable of when left unchecked.

He knows that the lifestyle in store for him will be taxing. He knows that sometimes he might be even more miserable than he is right now. Living constantly on the run can't be easy, but maybe it's more exciting than this. Maybe, at the very least, he won't feel the monumental weight of what everyone knows about him shoved down on his shoulders at all times, an inescapable ball and chain shackling

him to a past that he'll never be allowed to grow up from.

He knows that people around town still talk about how his parents died. He knows that when Hunk mentions him to his parents at home, his mom asks, *"The one with the dead parents? The one whose parents died in that crash?"*

He knows that he's marked here, in this town. Branded by the burn of a terrible experience that no one will ever allow him to forget. That everyone expects something from him, soon or someday, or eventually, at least. And generally, he can ignore it. Generally, he can pretend that he's just like everyone else, but…

He doesn't know why those words from the detective rattled him so terribly. Until now, his neighbors in this town have been polite enough not to address it to him directly. They just whisper behind his back. They just talk to him sweetly, softly, as though all these years later he could possibly still be tender and damaged because of it.

He always liked to tell himself that they were just trying to be nice. When he was a kid, it felt good to be coddled when other children weren't given the same consideration. But he grew too big to fit into that stuffy role, started caring more about himself as an autonomous person and not an extension of rumors or unfair expectations. He outgrew the role of a child rattled by grief, but he still can't escape from it. Managed to scab over the burns of his past and to shed them, but they're still there, faintly on his skin, if anyone cares to stare at him for too long.

He reaches the middle school as he's pondering this, as he's wondering if he's so bothered by this because of the relevance to his current masochistic thought patterns, or if maybe it's just the audacity of that woman, thinking that she has any right to bring up his parents when, for so many years, it's been the silent "something" that everyone else in town tiptoes around, at least when he's close enough to hear it. He unlocks the front doors with the code on the keypad, grumbling to himself and scratching roughly at his hair. It's almost midnight, he can see it on the clock just as he enters the front hall. He's going to start this new chapter of his life angry, it seems, and all because some nosy bitty couldn't keep her opinions to herself. All because, despite how hard he's been trying, he still hasn't managed to put a lid on his more childish and unruly emotions, and surely, this is the biggest reason why he definitely isn't fit to leave with Keith and Shiro, no matter how successfully he's managed to pull the wool over both of their eyes.

The whispering outside is cut off abruptly when he closes and locks the front door. It's suddenly too quiet inside without it, and he stops, his mind blanking. He swivels around and looks about the empty, ill-lit halls. He gazes outside, catching just his shadowed reflection against the black glass. The feeling of being watched persists, but it feels lesser now. The silence is palpable. He realizes suddenly, his heart stammering in his chest, that something or *someone* might have been following him all the way from the convenience store to his job here.

But why? And *how* ?

Does Keith even know where he works? Does he even know how to get to the convenience store from the apartment complex? Has he followed him before? Was he waiting out there until Lance locked up and tailed him all the way from one job to the other without bothering to make his presence known?

Why would Keith follow him instead of just meeting up with him? Why would Keith allow him to go inside instead of calling out to catch his attention?

Is Lance just imagining all of this, or could it be that… whatever is outside, it isn't Keith?

He shudders a breath, shaking his head. He rubs his hands together nervously, wincing as one palm rubs against the wound on the other. He knows that he must smell like blood to a well-trained nose. He wonders if this is a bad time to see a creature that thrives on nothing but.

But his need for company overrides his reasonable urge to not be murdered in cold blood here. He shuffles back to the door, flipping up the safety latch and propping it open. A cold gust of night air shoves inside, chilling him from clothes to skin to bone, and he can see the faintest hints of small snowflakes flittering down from the black sky to the frozen ground, in the pool of dim light from the inside, but he can't make out much else. He can't feel a presence either, as he suspects that Shiro might be able to when Keith is close by. He just stares dumbly, holding his breath, out into the black wall of dead and silent night, listening to the sound of the owls hooting and critters shuffling through the dark branches of the trees some ways away. He breathes in shallow gulps of the frigid air outside, squints his eyes as though he might be able to acquire night vision if he focuses hard enough.

And finally, with a hoarse, untrained voice, he calls out.

“H-hey, uh… anyone out there? Is someone here?”

He can’t remember exactly how that Nietzsche line goes, but the concept of it occupies his thoughts as he waits a few fretful seconds for anything to respond to him. Something about staring for too long at darkness or emptiness or something like that. He imagines that it wasn’t quite as literal as it feels right now, that Nietzsche wasn’t actually intending for people to avoid looking into dark nights in fear of something residing in the darkness looking back at them, but…

Nietzsche also didn’t know about vampires, probably, just as his high school philosophy teacher surely wasn’t aware of them when she laughed at a girl who suggested that the line was talking about monsters and wasn’t a reference to politics or morality or whatever boring lesson he’d dozed off during some moments after his classmate began arguing with the teacher about her personal interpretation.

He’s distracting himself from his discomfort with this thought, considering if perhaps the great minds of the past might have intended for their words to be taken more literally than teachers across the globe were so oft to claim, that they’d known in some way that a creature like Keith could actually exist, and frequently-quoted phrases like “don’t look at the darkness for too long or the darkness will look at you too” (quoted from memory, the forgotten line nags at the back of his thoughts) were nothing but warnings far preceding this fated meeting that he’s having just now.

Lance shouldn’t be surprised, really, and isn’t completely, when he feels the vibration of words just at the shell of his ear. And despite the fact that he’d definitely expected some sort of response when he’d called out into the night, he still can’t stop himself from jumping back and howling in fear when Keith’s soft voice practically materializes from nothing, mere centimeters away from him. He whips his head around and stares at Keith, owl-eyed, with his arms raised defensively in front of him as though that might actually help him when facing off against a creature apparently strong enough to take out a mountain of a man like Officer Sendak with ease.

“You have terrible prey instincts.” Keith isn’t wrong, but Lance is still offended, once he regains his bearings and remembers how to speak English properly again. “What if I wasn’t the one following you? You’d just open the door for anyone?”

Lance straightens out, his shoulders shooting up and his arms wrapping around himself. He stomps his foot once, anger immediately rushing in to flood out his fear, but adrenaline, even still, popping through his veins and confusing any coherent thought in his head.

“W-who else has that weird— *whispery* thing going on?! It’s not like I’ve ever met anyone in town who has to make the same overdramatic entrance every time that they go anywhere! How many people do you think I’ve met before who are like, walking, talking horror movies, Keith?!”

Keith reels back, his brows shooting up and his cheeks puffing out. Lance has never seen him so evidently offended before, but his head is too dizzy with an onslaught of overcharged emotions for him to stop and appreciate it properly.

“Excuse me? I can’t help it. I didn’t realize that it annoyed you so much.”

His arms are crossed over his chest as well, and his angry face turns away from Lance as though he’s considering taking his leave now, to scramble off somewhere in the dark and nurse his apparently newly-bruised ego and lick the proverbial wounds that Lance’s rudeness has left in his heart. His words are still relatively deadpan and his expression drops from angry to stony in a matter of seconds flat, but there’s something petty about the way that he hangs around. Something childish and strangely innocent in the manner that he so clearly slipped up and expressed hurt when Lance insulted him, that once Lance comes down from his fright and his thoughts clear, he realizes that he really must have hurt Keith’s feelings. That Keith does, in fact, have feelings, as he’d informed him at the cemetery, and while he claims to avoid the bad ones, he doesn’t seem nearly as committed to running away from this as he seems eager to move past it.

Lance huffs a short breath that hangs in small clouds in the cold, and he reaches out just as fast, fast enough that Keith can’t stop him, or that he doesn’t even think that he’ll need to. Lance grasps his shoulder gently with cold-shaken hands. He turns Keith back to him, hesitates for a short moment to get acclimated to the feeling of Keith’s clammy skin through the thin fabric of his familiar white t-shirt, and swallows his nervousness. Works himself up to speaking again at rapid speed, reminds himself that he was just hoping for this as he was walking to work tonight—for company, that Keith has been kind enough to grant him without even being asked.

“N-no,” he says quietly, shaken but trying his hardest to keep his voice steady, “I’m… I’m sorry, you just scared me. I know you can’t help it, it… it doesn’t bother me. I didn’t mean it, but… why did you come here? Did you wanna come in and, like, hang out or something while I work?”

Keith doesn’t move for a moment, just stands there like the statue that he so often is, watching Lance’s fingers on his shoulder sharply as though he doesn’t understand how they’ve suddenly found themselves touching him. He looks up a second later, catching Lance’s gaze and holding it, and it takes a substantial amount of effort on Lance’s part not to look away. Not to give in to the urge that he has not to stare into the abyss for too long, as though he could possibly become any more deranged than he is now.

“You’re wounded,” Keith tells him, “You’re bleeding.”

He isn’t wrong, but that doesn’t exactly answer Lance’s questions either. Finally, Lance drops his arm, his palm tingling once again as he breathes in deeply, flicking his eyes to the dark sky and the slow fall of the snow above them, to Keith’s dirty, bare feet on the asphalt ground, to the windows that need to be washed and the floor inside that needs mopped, and the menial tasks laid out before him that are, for the most part, going to be an easy job tonight. He takes a single step back, typing in the key code one-handed and pulling open the door. He moves inside, holding open the door with his back, and turning to Keith with a small smile. Feeling suddenly strange as he faces the reality that these two very different parts of his life will come together tonight, unexpectedly.

“You can come in,” Lance tells him, “I need to work, but if you don’t mind hanging out, I could use the company.”

He has a feeling that Keith might have already known that, but he says it anyway. Says it because it already feels strange giving someone permission to enter a semi-public building that he definitely doesn’t own, because he’d love nothing more than to spend more time with Keith and later, with Shiro. And to get to know both of them deeper before inevitably, they run away together.

Keith doesn’t respond to him, but he does step into the school. And it looks just as strange as Lance has suspected that it would. It’s otherworldly to witness Keith, half-naked, bathed in the security lights glowing dimly all around them. To see Keith’s shapely, white thighs beneath that t-shirt illuminated, the indents of subtle muscle under

the fabric, the sparkle of light in his glossy hair, the violet flecks of color in his eyes that Lance has never noticed before. His teeth, when he opens his mouth to speak, are uniform straight, white. They're framed by those long fangs that barely fit behind his lips. The curls of his inky hair fall into his face. His skin looks like marble here, in the light. He looks like some kind of art piece smuggled from a museum and curiously planted just in the middle of this tiny, small town middle school.

Lance clears his throat, feeling suddenly uncomfortable and embarrassed at the sight of Keith uncovered and exposed like this. The state of his clothing seems even more revealing when Lance's eyes can make out so many details. So many indents and shapely curves, and shadows between the gaps where his thighs come closer together and his hips hike up the loose fabric of that thin shirt just a little too high for Lance's mental wellbeing right now. At least in the dark, he thinks, he could pretend that his vision was just playing tricks on him. At least at night in all of that blackness, he can tell himself that one weirdly angled bend won't reveal to him just about everything that Keith has to offer underneath that shirt.

And he doesn't know how to ask Keith if he can even *do* things like that—as in, the sorts of things that seeing Keith like this, right now, is making Lance's often-neglected libido gear his thoughts towards—or if he even wants to. Or if he's even aware that humans have sex for fun, or why they'd bother, how good it can feel when done right with the right people. He doesn't know if Keith feels need in the traditional sense, or if his body can even function in those ways as a human would, seeing as blood is required for—

His face feels suddenly very, very warm. He nearly trips as a result of the speed that he turns away with. He slides a bit on the tile as he rushes away, and he gets the sense that he isn't being followed, even though he realizes that he wouldn't be able to recognize it even if he were. And reliably, Keith is waiting in the doorway of the janitor's closet for him, arms crossed, leaning against the frame of it, as Lance fumbles to put away his things. He's too worked up to even be frightened properly, but maybe that's for the best. Keith doesn't seem to get any thrill out of scaring him, apparently. If anything, it seems to hurt his feelings. It seems that he might be trying to seem less threatening now, emulating the way that Lance has stood in front of him before. Trying so clumsily to appear more human and less otherworldly. Like a dog walking on its hind legs. Like a parrot learning to speak its first human words.

Awkward and strange, he feels guilty for even thinking it. But Keith, stiff and postured and so underdressed to be seen in public, just looks like a posed mannequin, just looks like something inanimate pasted here over the backdrop of this school—until he moves, which seems too fluid, too easy and seamless and devoid of the natural jerkiness and weightedness of a corporeal, organic being.

Lance can't exactly put his finger on what's so weird about it. He thinks that maybe he'd be able to figure it out if he could see a normal person moving around in the same way, just next to Keith. But it reminds Lance a lot of watching Mary Poppins when he was a kid—how the cartoons always looked like cartoons, and there was no mistaking them for normal people. How they moved too quickly and too languidly, how their conversations never seemed totally natural with real people, and how strange it was to see them touch the people or hand them something. How it was always so awkward that it would kill his immersion for a brief moment when it happened.

Keith feels a lot like that, never human enough to stop the hairs on the back of Lance's neck from rising. Never natural enough in any setting to fit in with it perfectly. Always singled out as something transcendental and incongruous. Always more beautiful and awe-inspiring than anything else in this town that Lance could find his eyes drawn to instead.

He busies himself with filling the mop bucket with water, stopping to hiss when he tenses his wounded hand wrong, and sparing a short glance in Keith's direction, as though the smell of his blood in this enclosed space might bother him or trigger some predatory response within him that would put Lance in inescapable danger. Keith seems unaffected by it, but he's watching Lance with an intensity that catches him off guard momentarily. He swallows around the lump in his throat, looking from Keith's gaze to the nozzle of the tap, to the wheeled mop bucket that's still only half-filled.

And he wonders if maybe Keith just doesn't understand what any of this is. His gaze travels to the various cleaning products on the shelves around them, lingers on the wet floor cones and the bleach bottles and the sawdust powder that's reserved for the day crew to sprinkle on vomit-related accidents. Lance clears his throat quietly, cutting back the power of the tap. The water drizzles out just as the bucket fills. He feels stupid about this even before he starts talking.

"My… my job here is to clean at night, so… I start by filling this bucket with soapy water and mopping, which is… uh, I have this mop

thing … this here—"

He reaches forward and jostles the pole of the mop. Keith's eyes find it quickly and settle on it, watching the way that the loose, gnarled strands at the top move about as it sways, allowing his eyes to travel slowly down the pole and to rest for a moment on the linoleum beneath it. And snapped back, seconds later, to the bucket and then to the soap that Lance has opened and started pouring inside.

"Basically, it's, uh, just like giving the floor a bath."

Keith tips his head to the side. His stare is even and blank, but a single brow is raised and his lips are pursed, and his hip is cocked out to the side as he leans more comfortably against the doorframe.

"I know what a janitor does. You could have just said that."

Lance almost laughs. He closes his eyes, cursing mentally and nodding his head. It's hard to breathe for a moment as his embarrassment floats through him, but he chooses to ignore it. He chooses, instead, to move on quickly from this blunder to something else. He cuts off the water completely and wheels the bucket into the center of the floor. And he tucks the mop inside, pushing it towards the door as Keith eases back to give him more room.

"I didn't know how much you knew about humans, sorry."

He's passing Keith as he says this, wheeling the cart into the front room, first, so it can dry before he needs to clock out for the night. He's plotted his route carefully, orchestrated these things so that he doesn't have to clean the same things twice. He spares a look at Keith's dirty feet, noting with relief that they aren't bad enough tonight that he's tracking mud or dusty prints behind him. He won't have to clean Keith off too, at least. There won't be any extra work involved just because he's decided to invite some company to join him for the duration of this shift.

Lance has started mopping by the time that Keith, perched atop one of the tables bolted to the floor in order to give him space to work without getting in the way, decides to speak again.

"I don't know how much I know," Keith admits flatly, devoid of any inflection that Lance might expect from such a loaded statement, "I didn't know anything about humans before I met Shiro, so… it's at least more than nothing."

Lance laughs quietly, he can't stop the smile that rises to his lips.

"Well, you know what a janitor is, right? And you know about hospitals since Shiro works at one… I guess you know about police, too… Say—"

He props his weight against the mop handle, turning to Keith fully and fixing him with a sly upturning of his lips, a coy rise of his brows, eyes slightly narrowed as though to emphasize exactly how ornery he's feeling now. Keith regards him blankly, as per usual, legs crossed and hands tucked in his lap to hold down the hem of his shirt. *Thankfully.* For Lance's health, at least.

"If you were a human, what kind of job would you wanna have?"

Keith doesn't offer much of a response right away, but Lance catches the small twitch in his frown. If he understood expression better, maybe, Lance imagines that he'd look curious, maybe offended, maybe a just a little confused.

He seems to be mulling it over, and Lance wonders if he's ever considered this sort of hypothetical before. If he's ever yearned to be a human again, or if the thought has never actually crossed his mind since he was born or reborn.

He's statuesque for a long time, watching the way that Lance moves the mop once he realizes that waiting without working will only extend his shift longer. And finally, once Lance is midway done with this room, Keith speaks up again.

"Shiro told me that some humans fight for a living. I think that could be fun. Or… I would like to fly on a plane. Or go to space. Or drive a car. Shiro let me drive his car once and I was good at it. I think I'd like to do something that involved driving."

There's something about words and the manner in which he speaks that causes an ache to fan out in Lance's chest. He imagines living a life already cut off from most of the world's suddenly limited possibilities, restricted by an inability to exist for half of the day, to walk among normal people and to even be seen by them. He knows that Keith is no more likely to ever be allowed to pilot a plane than he would be to be a passenger in one. He realizes that the headlights of cars would probably irritate his eyes, any fight that he could partake in with a human would be so unfairly matched that he couldn't be given a proper sparring partner.

He realizes, so belatedly, that Keith's existence is limited just to whatever he can do alone at night. Existing only to Shiro, as himself. Lonely and hidden and unable to dream of anything better because it's unlikely that humans would be welcoming if they discovered him. It would be impossible to find someone just like him, if there even *are* other vampires. And if those others have been good enough at hiding all this time that they haven't been discovered yet, Keith might live out the majority of his existence never knowing for sure that he isn't a lone anomaly.

He continues to clean, and Keith follows him dutifully and silently as he moves from room to room. At one point, he's aware of the fact that midnight has passed, as alluded to by the sound of fireworks popping somewhere outside, off in the distance at the park up the road where they're set off every year. He wonders, as he watches light filling the skies and illuminating the trees through the slivers of the windows through the ceiling of the middle school, if Keith somehow knew that they'd be setting them off tonight. And if maybe, from experience, he knows that he wouldn't enjoy being outside to witness it. It would be too bright and too loud for someone so sensitive. It might be just as scary as it would surely be disorienting. He's thankful that Keith decided to join him here tonight, even if he did so completely on purpose. He feels a quiver of guilt and sadness strike through him, thinking of how it might feel to know that he'd live an eternity never allowed to witness the beauty of so many things that humans have managed to create.

They head to the gymnasium, and Keith makes himself comfortable on the small section of bleachers that haven't been withdrawn away from the basketball court. This room takes much longer to clean than the others, and with Keith some distance away, Lance knows that he won't be able to have a proper conversation with him until he's done mopping. So he works quietly, and he catches Keith's eye once or twice as the fireworks continue to pop somewhere outside. In here, they're safe from the consistent flashes filling the sky with white, as the gym is the one room without windows to see through. He's thankful for that, too, but Keith doesn't offer a reaction to any of the noise. Something still feels weird here, as though Keith might be uncomfortable. As though a tenseness has suddenly settled over the gym while he was busy cleaning, and Keith might get fed up with all of this and dart back outside into the night at any moment.

Lance realizes once he's done with the floor that he's due for a break. And he takes that break not in the employee break room or the janitor's closet as he often might, but on the bleachers next to Keith,

kicking back and drawing out a long sigh, and resting his weight against the bench of seats behind him despite how awkward they feel prodding into his spine.

“Pretty boring, huh? This probably isn’t the kind of job that you’d want if you were a person, I guess.”

Keith isn’t looking at him, but instead watches the damp floor sparkling in the glow of the dim lights overhead. He’s sat bent slightly forward, his closed hands resting in his lap. His hair is hanging in front of his eyes, which are hooded now by thick lashes, as his jaw clenches momentarily and loosens soon after. Lance catches sight of the giant clock just at the other end of the gym, maybe accurate, maybe off by a dozen or so minutes. It’s nearing one in the morning. A new year has started and he’s still stuck here. And he doesn’t know if he’s disappointed in himself or not for not moving on sooner. He doesn’t know if a past version of himself, in this exact place last year, would be saddened to learn that he still hasn’t moved on, as he’s always dreamed that he would eventually move on.

“It’s peaceful.” Keith’s voice draws him out of his thoughts. “There aren’t any people either. It doesn’t seem that bad.”

Lance smiles, then nods slowly. He props his elbow on his knee and his face in his hand, watching Keith’s unmoving expression for an extended moment as the popping outside persists.

“Does this bother you?” he asks then, idly and casually and not nearly as nervous in this situation as he realizes that he might have been even just a few days ago. “The noise outside? Is that why you came here tonight?”

Keith’s eyes are dark and indiscernible and his lips are a flat line. He’s still enough that Lance almost feels as though he isn’t real here, but he knows better. He knows that he might never get the sense that Keith is a living, organic creature. He’ll always suspect to some degree that Keith might be more of a shared hallucination between himself and Shiro, but right now, that doesn’t make the sound of his voice or the sight of his beautiful, flawless face framed in that soft hair and haloed in the yellow-hued shadows of the gym any less of a reality or an important facet of Lance’s suddenly elevated mood tonight.

“Shiro warned me earlier that this would most likely happen. We’ve done this a lot, you know… this “new year celebration” thing that you humans do. He told me not to go outside tonight, but the lights would

have been too bright even in the apartment, so… I don't know. I guess —I guess I thought—"

Lance slings an arm around Keith's shoulders faster than he can even think to do so. He pulls him close in a one-armed hug, pressing his cheek to Keith's cheek and pulling both of them back to rest against the bleachers as he watches the hands of the clock continue to tick by.

"You're safe here, buddy. By the time my shift's over, I bet they'll be done setting them off. They usually are by then. I'll keep you safe, don't worry. You're in good hands with me!"

He can feel Keith swallow next to him more than he can hear it, and Keith's responding nod is jerky and small. They sit together like this for a long time without words, long enough that Lance knows that he's running behind on his duties, but he finds that he doesn't really care. He can get away with cleaning less because most of these floors have been unused for days now. More often than not, he only continues to clean them during the holidays to pad out the empty gaps of time left by their absences during his shifts.

But as he thinks about being strong enough to protect someone like Keith, he can't stop the nagging thoughts from jittering at the back of his mind. He can't ignore the pertinent issues surrounding Detective Sanda's intrusive questions earlier, or how much bolder she's gotten just in such a short amount of time.

He knows that he needs to fess up eventually, no matter how embarrassing it might be to admit that she'd bothered him so much. Shiro could be in danger, she could have gone to interview him right after she'd driven away from the convenience store earlier. And she could discover Keith, too, sooner or later. If he doesn't address this soon, he isn't sure how prepared they can be when she decides to hit them even harder.

"I have to tell you something, Keith, I-I think something bad is going to happen soon."

His arm slackens and slides from Keith's shoulders to rest instead around his waist. He pulls away ever ever-so-slightly, but stays slotted against Keith's body just enough that he can feel the cold of his skin seeped through his t-shirt but gradually mingling and warming with Lance's body heat.

"There's this detective who keeps sort of… I don't know, maybe it isn't a big deal, but she came into my other job a while back and said some

weird stuff about Shiro. And she stopped me on my way to work today and kept asking me about him, again, and… she mentioned my parents, too. I got so mad at her that I stormed off, but I don't think that's gonna stop her for very long. I think she's onto us."

Keith doesn't respond immediately, but his hand does find Lance's and his fingers twine between his, resting them together on their knees, still pushed together. He seems to be mulling over this new information, assessing the situation in ways that Lance isn't sure if he'd ever be able to understand. What would this sound like to someone like Keith, someone so powerful and so disconnected from all of it? Would it be like an ant attacking another ant, while Keith holds the magnifying glass above them? Would it feel petty and stupid and childish, or does he understand how dangerous this could be, even for him?

"Detective Sanda, right?" Lance twitches at the sound of the name, but he nods soon after, finding that suddenly it's hard to articulate even a hum of agreement. "She spoke with Shiro too. Shiro said that she's suspicious of you, but he doesn't know why she'd think that you were even connected to any of this. It's because of your parents though, isn't it? Because this town is so obsessed with your family."

Lance almost shoves him away, almost reacts without thinking, almost denies it and argues and almost tells Keith that he needs to be more tactful, needs to mind his own business, needs to stop thinking that humans are so simple that he can figure them out without even understanding why they think and feel the way that they do, but…

Lance can't shake the feeling that he might be right. He knows that Sanda has been working in this town long enough that she'd probably met his parents before. He knows that she must have been on the force when Veronica would call and complain about the threatening phone calls that they'd received on and off from a few loonies in town. He knows that people talk and that they make their own judgments, and that people have been waiting for him to fall from the rails for years now, because the youngest McClain, a famously "troubled kid", should have evolved eventually into criminal. He shouldn't have been functional or okay. Veronica had three children out of wedlock. His other siblings took off and never came back home.

It would make more sense to everyone if he fell apart in some obvious way. If he became violent to emulate the violence that's surely cultivated in his heart, if he hurt others in the same way that he's been hurting inside, all these years. In that way, he hates that maybe

they're right. He hates that perhaps this is the most expected next step for him, running away with two supposedly bloodthirsty killers, even though, deep down, he knows that it's more complicated than that.

So he shudders a sigh, lowers his head and tightens his grip on Keith's hand.

"I think so too," he tells Keith, "It's like… sometimes I get the feeling that people are mad that I didn't, I don't know, like ever go through a really rebellious phase or something, I guess. Like they keep expecting me to go nuts and when it doesn't happen, they don't get it. Like, people always think that if something bad happens to you, you're supposed to freak out and be totally broken over it in some big, obvious way and when you don't… it's like you're hiding it. Or you're lying. Like, you can't just come to terms with it and move on because they never stop waiting for you to explode."

He laughs, but it's shallow and devoid of any real humor. He tips back his head and gazes at the shadowed rafters and the dim glow of the security lights overhead.

"You know what it feels like to be trapped, right? Like, everyone always says that you're responsible for your own choices and everything, like the only person keeping you from being happy is you, but… I think that's bullshit. I don't think I'm allowed to be happy here. And—and I miss my folks, I do. I miss them so much, but… they're dead and I'm always just gonna be that kid with the dead parents. I'm always going to be like—like this powder keg person tiptoeing around lit matches—"

Another laugh, another squeeze of Keith's still and clammy hand.

"I can't be functional and move on because everyone is just waiting for later, when I finally blow up. I could get a really nice job and settle down and have kids and people in this town would still just be waiting for me to beat my wife or kill my family or rob a bank or something. And… it's exhausting, I guess. You can't—you can't grow or get better when everyone just wants you to stay bad, you know? I don't want to miss my parents as much anymore, but I can't… I can't move on because it's *everywhere* around here. I can't… be a better person because this whole town is just so… shitty and dark and cold and... lonely. And even if I got better, I'd still just be… here. And I'd still be cold and sad and… I guess I'm just afraid that no matter where I go, I'm still gonna be me. But I just won't be able to blame it on anyone else anymore."

Keith doesn't breathe, still, but Lance has a feeling that if he chose to, he'd be sighing right now. It's something about the dip of his brows and the way that he juts out his lip. Something about the glassiness of his eyes as he raises them to watch the blanks of black between the lights on the ceiling. The way that his fingers lace around Lance's and pull both of their hands into his lap, and how Keith places the other hand atop both of them, as though in place of the clumsy words that he might not even know how to phrase right now, he thinks that physical comfort can fill in those empty spaces just as adequately.

"I know what it feels like to be trapped," Keith says instead, "But I don't think being you would be so bad."

Lance feels suddenly humiliated, suddenly discounted and offended and childish for thinking that anything that he's going through could be worse than any of the number of messed up things that Keith has seen and lived through. But hearing him say it stings anyway, because it confirms those fears: that Lance himself isn't smart enough or grown up enough to be thankful for what he has. That people do have it worse, that he has no reason to feel this down about his situation. That he's vying to throw away a perfectly good life just because he isn't mature enough to appreciate it, but before he can open his mouth to argue or apologize, Keith cuts him off again.

"I mean… if you stay… *you* , when we leave, I'd be happy, I… I guess. I don't think there's anything wrong with you, how you are now. So I don't understand why you want to change when we go away. Why you'd wanna stop being this kind of person who… is nice and makes me happy. And makes Shiro happy. I don't think you'll change very much when we leave, but there's nothing wrong with you in the first place."

And before Lance can stop himself, before his brain is given even the briefest opportunity to calculate his body's response, he's moving forward, he's shoving himself closer to Keith, closer to those dark eyes and those full lips and that soft, inky hair curled at the high apples of his cheeks.

And he presses his lips to Keith's, kisses him lightly, gently, so long in the limbo of time that they've suddenly slipped in, and so cool and smooth and strange and otherworldly. But it feels wonderful, feels like something that he wouldn't mind doing for the rest of eternity. He breathes, shaky and uneven. Keith's hands tighten around his.

Lance ducks back quickly, coming to his senses with a jolt of

embarrassment and self-awareness as his cheeks rush with color and his fingers tremble desperately against the seat of the bleacher, and in Keith's lap, trapped between his palms.

"I—sorry, I didn't, I mean—"

But Keith cuts him off again, shoves forward and kisses him back without hesitation. As though he's been eagerly waiting for this. As though Lance has broken open the floodgates and the water rushing through the gaps is not dangerous or drowning, but just Keith's lips against his, again and again, until his fuzzy thoughts and his silly worries and insecurities are nothing but a distant memory. His hands leave Lance's, they frame his face, soft and cool like shaved ice.

Lance's heart pounds rampantly in his rib cage. His hands find Keith's shoulders. They're pulled closer, they kiss softly.

Outside, the fireworks continue to patter. The sky beyond the building is bathed in a myriad of sparkling colors, reflected on the snow, still falling thicker and thicker as the hours pass by.

It's been a year and Lance is still stuck in the same place.

But, he realizes slowly, he isn't the same person anymore.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Connecting…

Connecting…

Connecting…

Connected! 3:34 A.M.

Shimizu has joined the chat!

Pigeon has joined the chat!

Pigeon : It's still a little soon for me to be hearing from you, isn't it?

Shimizu: How did you know it was me?

Pigeon : I recognized your I.P., but that's not really important right now. What do you want?

Shimizu : I think we might have to move soon, so if you wouldn't mind assisting me again, I would be more than willing to pay any additional fees required for inconveniencing you at such short notice.

Pidgeon : As much as I'd love to bleed you dry, that won't be necessary. Just for the one, depending on how soon you need it… 3 should be enough. Just like last time.

Shimizu : I don't need it as quickly as I did before, so please feel free to take your time. But I need two now, if that's okay. I can send you any information that you might need if you're willing to take both of us.

Pigeon : Two, huh? Did you go and fall in love with some beautiful small town woman? A golddigger with a pure heart and a taste for

adventure?

Shimizu : Something like that.

Pigeon : It's too inconvenient to send files over this connection, so if you give me her name, I'll just look her up and see what I can do.

Shimizu : It's Lance McClain. Born in Cuba, moved here about a decade ago, I believe. Nineteen years old, about 5'10, give or take. Maybe 140lbs.

Pigeon : Ohhhhh, it's a Lance, not a lady. Gotcha.

Pigeon : Does he have any identifying features that are gonna make my job more difficult? Like your whole… arm situation?

Shimizu : Nothing at the moment.

Pigeon : Yeah, of course, no guarantee that he'll stay in one piece before you leave, right? If it wasn't in my best interest to keep my nose out of your business, I'd be really curious about what your deal is, Mr. Shimizu.

Shimizu : It's very fortunate for me that it isn't in your best interest then.

Pigeon : You know, most of my clients are drug dealers or other dumb idiots who get caught within months of buying these flashy new identities. It's hard for people to be more than themselves, and that has nothing to do with how good I am at my job. That's just the human condition, to be stupid and reckless when they get too comfortable. But you're my only client that's been grandfathered in from some other dealer who actually got old enough to retire. You're the only one who doesn't have a cell phone or even knows what cryptocurrency is. You're talking to me on a hospital computer—what, are you on break? You're taking your fifteen minutes to talk to your identity dealer like it's not even a big deal at all? And why even work at that shithole when you've clearly got enough dough to throw around $6k on a whim when you've had your fill of the small town experience and decided that you'd rather run off with your little boytoy? What are you even running away from? What kind of person needs to go through more than one fake identity in their lifetime? Does this "Lance McClain" know what he's getting into? Is he even going along with you willingly?

Pigeon : That's what I'd ask if I were curious. But it's not my job to be

curious.

Shimizu : It's not my job to divulge that sort of information either, so I'm glad that we've come to an agreement.

Pigeon : Yeah, okay… Mr. Mysterious. Fair enough.

Pigeon : Message me back when you can, but give me at least 24 hours. Make sure you have your stupid Moneygram ready by then. 6, for two people. Don't forget that.

Shimizu : Thank you, Pigeon. You've been a huge help.

—Pigeon has left the chat—

Disconnected! *3:40 A.M.*

"Good morning, neighbor. Interesting weather we've been having lately."

Lance stiffens, sucking in a short breath and swiveling around to meet the face connected to the voice that's just greeted him. He's caught off-guard by it, by hearing it this early in the morning and not just in the late night, secluded and safe from nosy gazes, but he's been surprised too much lately. Gotten his fill of it after being spooked time and time again without end. He feels as though he's just too accustomed to the feeling of being on his toes that he doesn't offer much of a reaction. And the person behind him, grinning wide and brightly in a way that barely touches his dark eyes, doesn't seem disappointed in the least that he didn't manage to get a rise out of him.

But a mirrored smile spreads over his lips nonetheless, because he can't deny that he's more than pleased to see the person attached to those words. Shiro, standing in the early morning grays, has his hand shoved in the pocket of his familiar knee-length dark coat. There's a plaid-printed, threadbare and faded a scarf strewn haphazardly around his neck and over his wide, low shoulders, and beneath the

winter clothes, Lance makes out the legs of pajama pants, the moccasin-style slippers stained in the dampness of melted snow. Under Shiro's arm, tucked up between it and against his ribcage, is a newspaper sparkling with condensation and off-colored snow, wrapped in foam green plastic that does little to save it from the dampness of the ground that the paperboy had left it on. Lance can see that the ink has already stained and run together underneath the packaging, can see the words drawn out in long trails and bled against the plastic in small splotches, but he has a feeling that coming outside today was less about fetching the paper that he doubts Shiro ever reads and more about knowing roughly what time Lance generally comes outside to drop the kids off for school.

The kids themselves, having spent the majority of their winter break in daily programs to keep them safe and entertained while Lance and Veronica have needed to work, never had the opportunity to grow too accustomed to sleeping in. He feels the smallest hints of guilt nagging at his heart when he thinks about it, when he considers that they've still been robbed of some semblance of these normal childhood experiences just because their mother and uncle can't afford a better life for them.

But there isn't a workaround and they seemed to have enjoyed playing with the other latchkey kids and watching movies and eating the snacks that the school provided anyway. It seemed like a much-needed social outlet where Lance himself had often withdrawn when left to his own devices, alone, at their ages.

His niece had still groaned and complained when they'd woken up this morning, as though they haven't done so over the last couple of weeks anyway.

"But school is different!" she'd complained, and Lance had known that she was right. He'd known that it was less fun to learn than to play, but he'd also known that she couldn't stay home either. Life is all about making hard choices, is what he'd told her too. Life is all about doing things that aren't fun at the time so you can be happier later on. She'd asked him what happened if life never got fun later. He hadn't had the heart to tell her that that's just how life is.

But now that he's seen them off, he tries not to think too hard about it. Shiro, in front of him, looks sleepy, but still handsome in this setting that's so oddly unfamiliar compared to the framed blackness and the dim window-lights that Lance often sees him cloaked in. In the hazy morning, now, Lance can recognize just how dazzling that

stark white hair is against his ivory skin, how the dark dots of his irises pop against the monochrome of face, his hair, his white brows, and pale lips. He's a black and white photograph. He's history cemented, permanent and relatively unchanged, against the backdrop of an ever-evolving world. Lance feels the same rush of nostalgia while looking at him now as he might feel gazing at an antique behind safety glass in a museum. Shiro is a relic encapsulated in his own amber, frozen and petrified and undamaged by time, stalled in his natural progression by Keith, and dropped here, right in the center of this 21st century shithole apartment parking lot, and just as out of place and jarring as it might be to see one of those old Egyptian mummies springing from their sarcophagi and mingling with the onlooking museum crowd. Shiro's smile smooths out to a more comfortable half-frown, and he tips his head to peek around Lance at the slow-descent of the school bus down the street and around the corner before it finally disappears.

"Another school day?" he asks, as though it isn't a Wednesday. As though winter break didn't end nearly a week ago, and he hasn't been in spotty communication with Lance since last year ended and the new year began.

Lance plays along because they've talked about this. He plays his role because he still can't shake the feeling that they're being watched now. He's caught glimpses of that sleek black vehicle parked on street corners and circling the apartment complex at odd hours. He's gazed through the window of his job at the convenience store and spotted it climbing gradually through the snowy highway up ahead. That detective hasn't shown her face at either of his jobs again, but they've talked about this. Shiro has told him that they need to be careful. They need to pretend that they've barely exchanged words before they've just been inspired by her meddling to meet each other now.

But this, this greeting under the guise of Shiro grabbing the morning paper and Lance seeing his sister's children off to school as he so often does, it's clever. He almost laughs at how sneaky of a man Shiro is actually capable of being under the right circumstances. It's clearer when watching his work in action how he's managed to tiptoe just beyond the fingers of the law for so long. It's clear that beneath the facade of a man who's never been capable of fitting seamlessly into his own skin or the role granted to him by an ancient creature that he fumbles to protect, Shiro has a few tricks up his sleeve. He isn't as innocent as he might have once led Lance to believe. And he definitely isn't helpless now, in the face of trouble, as Detective Sanda might still naively believe.

“Getting the morning paper, I see,” he says lightly, tipping back on the balls of his heels to work more body heat into his numb legs, “Do you like reading the morning comics over breakfast too? My sister always reads the *‘For Sale’* section just to make fun of the weird stuff that people don’t wanna throw away.”

Shiro offers him a quiet laugh. His eyes linger on the white-powdered road just beyond the mouth of the complex parking lot where they stand. Neither of them responds to each other’s questions, but there’s a language that they’re speaking through these statements, through the coy smiles and the silent beats between their words. Lance feels as though he barely has a grasp of what all of this is supposed to mean, but he tries to keep up. He enjoys the sight of Shiro looking so bedraggled and domestic. He wonders if Shiro always wears cute pajamas with those funny little teddy bear prints, or if this might be his only pair. He wonders if Shiro reads the paper to Keith when he wakes up, or if every part of this gesture is only for show.

“I’ve been told by a certain detective that we should be friends.” It sounds innocent and cheeky. Lance bites his lip. He gazes out into the street where Shiro’s vision is still honed. Among a smattering of cars parked in an empty parking lot just up the street—rusted pickups and dusty, aged and barely functional minivans, and jalopies barely safe enough to drive even just a few blocks—there’s a stark dot of glossy black that’s hard not to focus on the moment that his eyes catch it. He sighs quietly, training his features to stay relatively friendly, trying his hardest to play his designated role despite how hard it is not to be annoyed.

He feels like he’s been living on house arrest for days now. It feels like he can’t even breathe without wondering how suspicious it might look to someone as paranoid as this Detective Sanda.

Shiro said that she had photographs. He wonders if she’s taking any now. Shiro said that she had files upon files crowded in that same folder that Lance spotted in her back seat before, and he can’t help but feel oddly scandalized, wondering where she’s managed to scrounge up so much information about both of them.

“I heard the same thing, actually. People around town seem to think that we’d get along really well.”

Shiro nods, and his eyes trail from the black car and back to the gray sludge snow, to the small sprigs of grass poking about in all of the white just ahead of them, to Lance’s feet and Lance’s legs, and finally,

back to his face. Lance fidgets somewhat, wondering if he should have worn something nicer. Wondering if he should have wetted his hair or brushed his teeth before dragging himself out of bed to take the kids to the bus this morning. Shiro has definitely seen him in a better state than this, so hopefully, it won't damage the impression that he has of him too much. But he's definitely not nearly as handsome just having woken up as Shiro looks to him right now—like some kind of picture out of a fancy pajama catalog. Like a Macy's model posed on a cute plaid couch with a mug of coffee in his hand, tousled hair, a sleepy smile, and enough charisma that he might fool any innocent buyers into thinking that they, too, could look so attractive if they'd just buy the fifty-dollar PJ set that's listed at the bottom of the page.

Lance wants to say a lot of things to him this morning, but he bites his tongue. This routine isn't about catching up or talking about important matters. The eyes watching them are doing so too closely for that. They can't pretend to be too comfortable. Lance can't reach out and place a hand on Shiro's shoulder without risking it looking too comfortable. He can't express as plainly as he usually might that he's missed Shiro, that he's thrilled to see him, that he wants nothing more than to see him as much as possible from now on because… He isn't sure how any of that might register over the distance of the street, through Sanda's binoculars or high-definition camera that she might be taking creepshots with.

So for now, he accepts that this meetup is supposed to look accidental, a by-chance face-to-face encounter with someone who they've both been accused of befriending long before. It's more about establishing a narrative, he thinks, that maybe they've gotten to know each other better since they were both investigated and grilled about each other by Sanda, that this could potentially be warped to look as though it's totally her fault.

Shiro might tell another detective later, if they ever question him again, *"Well, your other officer kept asking me about Lance McClain, so I wondered if I should get to know him better. I never would have considered talking to him before that."*

It might be an easy way to leak her involvement in a case that isn't even truly a case, and out her to her peers in a way that's less of a guilty man grasping for the first straw that he can find, and more akin to the absent-minded, accidental confession of an innocent bystander who doesn't understand why the police would suspect that he'd befriended a stranger in the first place or why they'd even care at all.

And it's about dangling the one piece of evidence that Sanda seems to believe that she has against both of them, right in front of her nose. Shiro seems to believe that this alibi will crush her other, more private theories. He seems to think that she's been given such a limited amount of proof so far that even one piece of information being disproven might cause her entire case to topple down. And it might, Lance isn't sure. He doesn't have the experience to cite and he definitely isn't clever enough to have thought this through to the extent that Shiro so clearly has.

But according to Shiro, if they become friends now, and they weren't friends before this, then what proof does she have that Lance knew anything about the disappearances in the past? It still doesn't undo the damage that she's already done to Shiro, but Shiro believes that clearing Lance could buy them some time. If they can throw her off of his scent, it sets her back. And Lance doesn't understand it entirely, but he goes along with it anyway. They've been staging these random meetings in obvious places for days now. They've been crafting a false reality around their relationship that might as well be ironclad by the time that the police might actually wise up enough to get involved with Sanda's insanity.

Yesterday, Lance dropped his bag and Shiro helped him pick up his spilled things when they were both on their way to work. The day before, they greeted each other briefly at night when they both returned from their shifts. This is the natural progression of friendships, maybe, in Shiro's head. The short greetings and almost conversations, and then, now:

"Say, would you like to get some coffee with me? If you could give me a minute to look presentable, I know a nice place."

Lance bites his lip to quell his smile.

"Uh, yeah, sure. I just have to… get ready too."

"That's great, thank you. I'll meet you out here in about twenty minutes?"

Shiro nods. He grins, then reaches a clumsy hand up to scratch at the back of his head, mindful of the paper still tucked under his arm.

Lance is pretty sure that Shiro is referring to the diner just a little way up the street. It has nice bacon and eggs for cheap and free, endless refills on coffee. He could use the caffeine if he's going to be sacrificing his sleep. But resting suddenly doesn't feel quite as

important when he's faced with the possibility of a first date with Shiro. It's not even among the top ten things that he wants to do right now, as they part, and he scurries back to his apartment. He thinks about brushing his teeth and fixing his hair and maybe sneaking on a small dab of cologne. He contemplates wearing his nicest clean shirt just to remind Shiro that he's actually capable of looking like a normal human being when he's given the opportunity to take care of himself.

Something pressing that they still haven't talked about is Lance's date with Keith the other night, the goings on at the middle school, and that kiss. He doesn't know if Keith told Shiro or not, but they definitely haven't discussed it as a group. Even during the short moments when they can sneak in a conversation, it's difficult to find the right opportunity to admit it. He doesn't spend enough time with either of them to feel comfortable bringing it up. He doesn't think that Shiro would be upset, of course not, but he does feel as though he deserves to know about it. He deserves to be up to date on any new developments in the relationship that they all three agreed to pursue together, on a night just weeks ago that feels as though it might as well be centuries behind them.

Keith is not, in fact, the person that he thought he'd move further with first. Keith, always so distant and intimidating and more often than not, *terrifying* , had been, in his mind, the partner in this three-way relationship that he'd been the most clumsy getting to know and interacting with without feeling as though he'd just fumbled the whole thing. He'd always kind of suspected that he'd be in this position with Keith, instead—trying to figure out how to admit to him that he cozied up to Shiro while Keith was out in the woods doing whatever the Hell he usually does out there. Trying to find the right words to express that he isn't trying to steal Shiro away or box Keith out, but he's just found that Shiro is more… human. And less scary. And easier to read and communicate with when there aren't a hundred or so years between them and Lance doesn't know how to talk to a vampire, and Keith doesn't know how to not be incredibly spooky.

But with Shiro on the receiving end, with Keith unexpectedly becoming the first one that he's cemented even just a few of those landmark couple experiences with, Lance finds that he just feels guilty. It's harder to map out exactly when things changed, when he found himself losing time with Shiro, but… he feels as though that might be more of Sanda's fault than theirs. And Shiro misses him, he knows, misses their friendly late-night conversations and their smoke breaks and the fleeting phone calls and soft looks exchanged between them. Keith is still the connection between them, but they need more

time together. And he misses Shiro too—misses everything that they'd built over the last few months. Misses the way that he could always rely on Shiro to make him feel better and safer just by being there. Misses the way that Shiro always seemed to understand him without the need for either of them to explain themselves.

So this will be nice. He doesn't even feel embarrassed when he tells Veronica that he's going out for coffee, because at least, she should expect this from the two of them. At least, she has to know that two supposed boyfriends would make time like this for each other. She still grins at him knowingly nonetheless, but he tries not to let it get to him. He still knows her shameful secret. He still has an ace up his sleeve that he could potentially use against her whenever he's ready to strike.

He gets ready quickly, winded as he finally manages to reach the courtyard once again. Shiro is waiting for him in the center of the parking lot, lingering close to his car, head tipped back and eyes trained distantly on the sky. It's been snowing on and off for days now, true to Veronica's warning, but the snow hasn't become so hard to manage that it's made it more or less difficult for Lance to get to work and back than usual, which is really all that matters. He's started taking the main road again, despite how much he would prefer the peacefulness of the less traveled streets, but even Shiro had told him that it wasn't a good idea to put himself in positions where he'd be cut off from the general population. He'd cautioned that he'd be putting himself in unnecessary danger if he made himself too vulnerable to another one of Sanda's attacks.

If Sanda was bold enough to make a move like that only the second time that she spoke with him, Shiro doesn't trust that she'll play by the rules later on. Lance knows that he's right and he hates that he's right. And for a split second, he mourns a version of his life where the biggest stressor was just passing one of his classes or finding the time to take a nap before he had to work late at the middle school.

He draws nearer to Shiro, noting that he's dressed under his coat in a dark pair of pants that Lance admittedly hasn't seen him in before. He swallows the urge to tell him that he looks nice, because of course he does. He always does, and saying it again, he'd just feel like an idiot who can't stop himself from stating the obvious. From parroting the same three idiotic phrases, perpetually caught in a loop of "Shiro is handsome", "Shiro is smart", "Shiro is a really nice person"—which so far has limited his capacity to be a good conversation partner to such a severe degree that he wouldn't be surprised to learn that Shiro

hadn't even realized that he's actually capable of having a normal chat that doesn't involve Lance blurting compliments at him left and right.

He feels suddenly on edge, suddenly painfully aware of the fact that the two of them haven't been in a position where fear or confusion or danger hasn't been a distraction from everything that they could conceivably talk about. And now, in this purely recreational social outing, he'll actually be obligated to come up with conversation and to respond in a clever, timely way that convinces Shiro that he isn't a total lost cause.

And maybe it's become easier with Keith because it isn't like Keith knows how people talk either. Lance can act like a total fool around him because, well… it's not like he's going to notice anyway. It's not like he'd even understand what makes someone weird when he, himself, has been weird for probably the entire hundred years or so that he's been alive.

"You look nice," Shiro greets him, and Lance's skin feels instantly ten degrees warmer, "I don't know if I've seen you dressed casually before."

Lance, hands shoved in his pockets, spares a final look at the spot in the trees through which he knows that Sanda's car still sits in that parking lot. He wonders if this will be okay, if it'll really go according to plan. Or if something else might spring up at just the last second, something unexpected and terrible that successfully throws a wrench in all of their carefully laid plans. He doesn't want to believe that things can go smoothly because he doesn't want to be disappointed when they don't, but Shiro is so organized and so put together. He's experienced and poised and handles even the biggest setbacks with ease.

Lance can't imagine that he's in bad hands now. He can't imagine any hurdle that Shiro and Keith wouldn't inevitably be able to climb over.

He breathes out, boots crunching through the snow as he rounds Shiro's car and smiles bashfully as Shiro opens the door and ushers him inside.

The interior isn't in much better condition than the outside, but there's a strange lack of blood spots in here, considering how many bodies have surely been transported in this car since Shiro bought it, what, two decades ago? It's worn down enough that it could easily be older than Shiro. It's such a heaving, miserable hunk of junk that

Lance can't imagine a time when it must have actually been a functional piece of machinery that wasn't just a little bit embarrassing to be seen with.

The fabric lining the seats is sun-faded and splotched with various discolored stains. There are snagged pieces fabric and those weird little balls of material all bunched up and scratchy under the hem of his pants as he slides in. Shiro closes the door and rounds the car. The steering wheel seems to have been fitted with a small knob that Lance has never seen before. It's slotted just to the far left, worn at the top where it's obviously seen much use, and Lance stares at it while Shiro makes his way to the driver's side, opening the door and sliding in to settle just behind the wheel. He has the thankful forethought to snap his gaze away, because he suspects that it would be rude to ask about it, and instead catches his own eyes in the rearview mirror and sneaks a peek at the small pile of things that Shiro has obviously tossed in the backseat haphazardly just because he's coming along today.

There's a first aid kit and a blanket and pillow. There's a pile of sweaters and coats too, and a few odds and ends that get lost in the mess of everything else. Lance is surprised to find that Shiro isn't as neat and tidy as he might have suspected from his behavior before, with how prim and proper and composed Shiro's mannerisms generally are, but this car is an absolute pigsty. His feet crunch against the old fast food bags littering the floor, knock through balled up paper wrappers and various bottles and random pieces of trash that should have been thrown out as soon as Shiro finished using them. There's a to-go cup in the cup holder between them that's had the lid taken off, and now, it's stuffed nearly to the top with cigarette butts that smell so stale that Lance can feel his stomach roil in disgust and discomfort. The windows are filthy and splotched with old mud stains and water marks and the spotting of melted snow and salt residue, but Lance tries not to hold that against him, too. It's unreasonable to expect for someone to wash their car every time that it snows and the town salts the roads, because it'll only happen again soon after. It's impossible and expensive to keep up with that kind of maintenance.

But it pulls together the blatant, undeniable image of a slob nonetheless. Lance almost laughs at how much of a wreck this car is. He's taken aback, thrown off and mystified by the fact that the first flaw that he's actually managed to discover when it comes to Shiro wouldn't be anything menacing or heartbreaking or anything that might cause Lance to second guess throwing away his life here in pursuit of an eternal existence with someone like Shiro, but… Embarrassing, instead, and kinda gross. Shiro's space here reminds

Lance of dorm rooms and NEET nests that he's seen online in the past. It reminds him of watching Hoarders with his sister, of skimming through articles about refurbished homes and the vast amounts of effort that it takes to improve a space once someone else has trashed it.

It's definitely a lot to take in. Lance knows with absolution that this isn't going to fly once he's officially part of their team, but… It's funny to see now. It's hilarious, almost, to imagine that night when he first spotted Keith across the courtyard, and wondering if Keith was forced to travel on top of all of this crap while, to Lance, he'd seemed so ethereal and untouchable and so inhuman and unburdened by the reality that every other living creature in the world has been forced to exist in since the beginning of time.

Keith, half-dressed and poreless and bone-white and thin, doesn't feel even a fraction as scary when Lance imagines how he'd struggle to pull himself out of the car from this rat's nest. There's a sense of hilarity suddenly settled over every experience that he's had with these two since he met them, and he doesn't know why it's so funny. He isn't sure why suddenly, Shiro being such a secret slob has humanized both of them to the point that he almost can't even take this whole "immortal vampire" thing seriously anymore.

But it's a step up from Sanda's car, he has to admit that, at least. It doesn't feel like he's being carted off by the CIA to be experimented on or tortured or something, and at least there's some semblance of humanity here that doesn't make him feel as though he's been plucked from his regular life and put on display at some lab. And at least he knows that if they got into a wreck, his body would be cushioned by all of this trash. The airbags would definitely help too, but the piles and piles of garbage might cushion him so safely into his seat that he could walk away from something even as severe as flipping the car over without even a scratch.

He can't stop himself from laughing, just as Shiro starts the car and cranes around to check behind him, easing slowly out of his spot.

"Something funny?" He asks, distracted, as Lance catches a few small peeks of him, curiously, using that weird knob on the steering wheel to change gears, "You're laughing at how messy I am, aren't you? Keith always complains about it too."

Lance bites his lip, but he can't cover up the smile that's still so determined to spread out over his lips. He covers that with a hand

over his mouth, turning his head away and watching the cars around them growing distant as Shiro pulls more fully into the parking lot and proceeds to shift gears and drive forward through it.

“Being messy isn’t the worst flaw a guy can have,” Lance says softly, words weighted with his laughter, still having a hard time not grinning too wide and goofy, and far too giddy given the circumstances, “Not like you’ve ever killed anyone before or anything.”

Shiro snorts a laugh. They roll slowly through the entrance of the parking lot onto the road, and when Lance chances a look at the passing parking lot, he notices with surprise that the black car isn’t there anymore. He breathes a long sigh of relief, and when he spares a look in Shiro’s direction, he can see his gaze straying there as well.

“I guess she gave up,” Lance tells him.

Shiro nods once, short and curt.

“She probably wasn’t supposed to be out there in the first place. I got a call from the police department the other day—they wanted to check in with me, I guess. They seem to think that Officer Sendak and I had… *something* going on.”

Lance muffles another short laugh at the sour look that washes over his face.

“They told me that the case was ruled as an accident, an animal attack, more specifically. It’s closed now, so… if that woman is still investigating us, she must be doing so on her own. Probably watching us during her lunch breaks or any opportunity that she can take to get away.”

He watches, then, the way that Shiro’s hand moves dexterously and gracefully over the strange controls of the steering wheel, thinks about how everything that Shiro does is smooth and practiced in ways that are telling of all of the time that he’s spent alive. Lance knows, from fleeting conversations, that Shiro hasn’t been around long enough that he’s seen the rise and fall of much except bad ‘80s glam metal and a few questionable fashion statements. But Lance isn’t so sure about Keith—isn’t even positive that Keith or Shiro know the exact dates or times that he must have been born or awoken *reborn* either.

Time, for Keith, it seems, isn’t quite as fluid and easily comprehensible as it might be for someone more connected to their humanity. He

claimed to have only started learning about humans after meeting Shiro, but for how long had he existed prior to that? How many years had he spent traveling alone, feeding on unsuspecting humans and only *existing* , before he'd learned to communicate easier, to love, to understand humanity to even such a small degree? How long had Keith crept through the earth before Shiro managed to capture him, and is there a chance that he's seen the rise and fall of civilizations and new technologies? Is it possible that Keith could have been around long before cars, even in their most primitive forms, were ever invented?

It's a weird thought. He isn't sure how he feels about any of it. Keith, looking no older than perhaps someone in Lance's age bracket, might be ancient enough to have lived Lance's lifetime ten or more times, but… he doesn't seem older, mentally, than Lance either. And Shiro, despite having plenty of time to perfect himself, to grow more graceful and to grow accustomed to the world and tackle its unique challenges with ease, doesn't act like an old man either.

Lance bites his lip. He watches the snowy white world around them passing by slowly. He's drawn from his thoughts by the sound of Shiro's voice, light and amused, laced with laughter that scores warmth just under the surface of Lance's skin.

"You look like you're thinking about something really hard."

Lance scoffs, grinning wryly and pressing the heel of his palm over his eye. He presses lightly, rubbing over it gently as though he's working out a tension headache. He can already feel one developing just under the dip of his brow, with how hard he's thinking and how tired he is and how much stress he's been under that he hasn't actually taken the opportunity to address yet.

"Yeah, sorry, I just… I was thinking about how old you and Keith are."

Shiro's brows raise. He's quiet for an extended moment, just to turn the wheel and ease the car into the parking lot of the diner. Lance catches himself, again, eyeing the way that he fiddles with the unfamiliar, knobby controls of his steering wheel as he finds a parking space to slide into.

"Well." Shiro's words are heavy as he sucks in oxygen, as he breathes out long and quiet and Lance finds nervousness inside of him to fill the abrupt silence. The car stalls for a moment before he flips the key.

He falls back to his seat, head tipped against the headrest and chin pointed upward. A small smile curls at the edges of his lips. “I talked to him about what he remembered once. He said that he woke up under a bridge, wrapped in a blanket. That there was a big fire. We came to the conclusion after our discussion of this that perhaps whoever put him there was trying to keep him safe until he woke up. But he said that he left that city after he fed because the fire was too bright. He stayed away for a long time after that and didn’t come back until, well, he met me. I’m not sure where he went during his time away, but… if he left and returned and if he’s as positive as he seemed at the time, he would have been “born” in New York, and… There were three fires in New York—three famous ones, at least. He mentioned that it was cold, that everything was frozen, so… I did a lot of research around that time—”

He laughs, hand still propped on the steering wheel. His eyes are distant and unfocused. The smile on his face reminds Lance of how his mother used to look when she’d tell him stories about how she’d met his father.

“My best guess would be 1835. But that’s a long time to be alive, isn’t it? One hundred and fifty years before I’d meet him. Nearly two hundred years between then and now.”

“That’s a lot of time not to have anyone,” Lance adds quietly, his voice suddenly so feeble that it’s barely there at all.

Shiro’s jaw tightens. He drops his hand and undoes his seatbelt, clearing his throat and turning to Lance slowly, smiling that same, familiar, sad smile.

“We should eat,” he says, “So you still have time to rest before work tonight.”

Lance breathes out slowly, nodding his head in agreement. He unbuckles his own seatbelt, reaching to the side and opening his door and being mindful of the trash that he doesn’t want to track outside as he steps from the car onto the asphalt ground. The snow here has melted, and the grit of the rock salt crunches as he steps over it. He closes the door, rounds the car and waits for Shiro to finish collecting his things before he, too, shuffles over the garbage and steps outside. There’s a short moment where they stay silent, awkward and shy, suddenly, as they both collectively seem to wonder “what now” in the face of this unique opportunity to meet up and actually talk with no strings attached. With no particularly strict time limit. With no

pressing matter to distract them from just how nerve-wracking this kind of thing actually is.

A quick glance around the parking lot reveals no obvious signs of that black car. Lance wonders if Shiro could be right, that Sanda really is sneaking around behind the backs of her bosses just to keep an eye on them. If she's risking her own job title just to tail them and if she even has conclusive evidence to explain this, in the event that the station found out about it.

And this hypothesis only raises more questions, more mysteries about what exactly she thinks that she knows and why she'd assume that Lance, of all people, could be involved. Keith might still be right, too, that she only suspects Lance because people usually look to him first when anything weird happens. People are always waiting for the other shoe to drop, but… *murder* ? That's a fairly big leap. It's not the most realistic assumption, considering that he hasn't gotten so much as a citation in his entire life, not so much as detention or a stern talking to from a teacher. He's been good, for the most part, and while he is, in fact, involved in this, he realizes that there's no reason why anyone should assume that he is.

It's unlike him, he knows. Veronica, perhaps the person who knows him better by now than anyone else in the world, would be bewildered if she ever learned what he's been up to in his spare time. She'd be monumentally disappointed, too, and he doesn't need the nosy detective to tell him that, that's for sure. But maybe Veronica, at least, would assume that something deeper must have been going on, in order for Lance to willingly get involved. She'd give him the benefit of the doubt, as many people in the past have not. Detective Sanda might think that he's up to no good for no reason, but at least he can always rely on Veronica to have his back. Even though, lately, he isn't sure if he even deserves that kind of dedication anymore.

Shiro begins to lead them into the diner, and Lance is relieved, when stepping through the door, when he's greeted by a nice, warm gust of air that successfully ebbs away the chill that's numbed his fingers and sent skitters of shivers trembling over his skin. It's chillier today than it has been, and the temperature is only expected to plummet until the spring. Winters here are unforgiving and dark, and he wonders if Shiro is fairing well, after spending the last year or so enjoying the warmer weather in the southeast. If he regrets leaving all of that behind and coming here, or if for whatever reason, the cold brings him a relief that Lance, frankly, could never even hope to understand.

They're seated by a perky waitress moments after they step into the restaurant. They slide into opposite seats at a small, rounded table, and Shiro takes a moment to admire the cover of his menu before he flips open to the first page. Lance already knows that he wants the breakfast platter, has come here enough times that he knows the general ins and outs and dos and don'ts of the menu. Shiro orders a black coffee and water, and Lance, an orange juice with no pulp. They wait in silence as Shiro skims over the different selections, and Lance folds his hands on the table, settled on the glossy surface of his own closed menu. The loopy letters of the restaurant name and the silly, cartoonish cow mascot stare up at him, but he ignores them. He allows his gaze to travel lazily over the sleepy, quiet world around him.

It settles eventually on the parking lot just beyond the window to his left. The lacy curtains around it have been pulled away and strapped off for years now with doily-style bows, and the curtains themselves are so yellowed with age that he almost forgets that, at one point, when he was a kid, they actually used to be white. The entire interior of the diner is supposed to be reminiscent of a southern-inspired hospitality that Lance himself has always felt disconnected from. The implication that the gaudy wallpaper and old framed photographs and the collection of porcelain dolls lining high shelves is supposed to spark a memory in him of a grandmother's house and these same deep-fried entrees served in such a place feels strange and still foreign, as though he's appropriating a memory that's never actually belonged to him. His own grandparents, lived and died and buried in Cuba before he'd ever met them, definitely wouldn't have collected dolls and they wouldn't have served country fried steaks. They wouldn't have called him "sugar" as the waitress does when she takes his meal order, or spoken in a molasses drawl of a thick rural accent that his parents used to find difficult to understand before they passed away.

Placed here so long ago and perpetually feeling alien and out of his element, the oddity of this community has grown on him, sure. He's learned to associate garish wallpaper and creepy dolls with homemade breakfast food bathed in grease and gravy. He's gotten used to it. He's found himself half-melted into this mixing bowl of a town like sugar in room temperature tea. This restaurant is nostalgic just because he's been coming here since he was a kid. The stained, patterned wallpaper reminds him of being full and cozy and contented only because that's what he's been trained to associate them with. Because over time, this restaurant became the place where he and Veronica would visit once per week to cash in on the half-price breakfast deals when money was particularly tight.

The memories that he has of this town aren't all bad, and he doesn't feel bitter or especially distanced or ostracized by the staff at this diner, or his bosses at the middle school, or Hunk and many of his patrons at the convenience store. They're good people who he doesn't want to see hurt. They're deaths that he might think back on someday—how he'll outlive them by centuries and know with certainty that even their great grandchildren have grown old and passed away as well. And it's an odd thought, knowing that he might outlive even this town. He might find someday that the factory has shut down for good, after all of the fear and inflated paranoia that this town's one remaining facet for funding might someday fail them too. In a hundred years, this place might be only ghosts and overgrown weeds, and a civilization buried under snow and ice, forgotten and preserved in the memories that its late citizens left behind.

And maybe it's for the best, if everyone moves on after him. Maybe things would be better if every wasted life toiling away in this secluded pocket of eternal winter someday broke from the daze that collectively holds each of them captive here and fled to someplace warmer, and sunny, where they could actually have a chance of finding happiness.

Their food arrives as Lance is still contemplating this, as he's wondering where this town will be in a hundred years or a millennium, how long might pass before this place is nothing but broken brick buried in soil and root, until the people have long-since wandered off in search of better opportunities, and this land is allowed to be engulfed by the snow and nature once again.

Shiro breaks this train of thought only once they've begun eating. Lance's eggs are messy sunny side up. The yolk spills out around the cut that he makes in the surface of it, soaking into the edges of the toast that he prods into the puddle. Shiro watches him absently, a small smile spread out over his lips. He flicks his eyes from Lance's hands back to his face, and he sits, poised with his fork pronged in a bite of steak, and says quietly, "You look happy this morning."

Lance can't stop a bashful smile from blossoming on his lips. His cheeks warm and his brows knit together and he finds himself funneling all of his attention for a brief moment onto the cut-up egg white/yolk conglomeration that he's trying to fork onto a slice of toast.

"I guess so," he says then, simple and awkward and just a little embarrassed, being caught in the act like this, "I guess it's just kinda

nice to think that… you know, we're gonna leave soon and… go somewhere warmer. I thought the snow was really cool when I was a kid, but this isn't home, really. My parents always used to say that eventually, this would *feel* like home, but… it still doesn't. I think they were wrong, and I guess… maybe it's nice to think that we'll find a place that is someday. That I'm not gonna be stuck here forever."

Shiro offers him a laugh, taking a bite from his fork and chewing for a moment. He's still watching Lance when Lance looks up, still smiling with his head turned just slightly to the side as though he's contemplating something.

"We'll definitely travel enough for that," Shiro tells him, "but I can't guarantee that we'll stay in one place long enough for it to ever feel like a real home."

Lance eats until he's finished his first piece of bread, nodding slowly as he allows those thoughts to circulate in his head. There's music playing just loudly enough over the speakers that he can barely make out the murmurs of it, but he can't recognize the lyrics or the chords above the chatter of the patrons and the waitresses conversing about the diner. Shiro drinks his coffee black, doesn't add sugar or the creamer that he'd politely declined when the waitress offered to grab some for him. He takes a short sip between bites, and Lance wonders if they'll ever eat breakfast together once they leave here, just after Keith has gone to bed. He wonders if there will ever come a point in their lives together where they learn to mix domesticity and living on the run and harboring a creature like Keith while keeping him secret with ease.

It's a nice fantasy, at least. It's a pleasant mental image to think of Shiro and himself eating breakfast on the balcony of another apartment in the late summer as the sun rises. How the gold of dawn might hold itself in Shiro's pale skin and white hair and dark eyes, how the lush green of the trees and the colorful flowers all around them might frame their new life with a warmth and beauty that this frigid, dark place never has. Lance has a feeling that Shiro doesn't cook often, if the fast food bags piled in his car and Keith's inability to eat human food are any indication. But Lance knows how to cook well enough—can make a mean breakfast and a few desserts that will surely make him a worthwhile ally once Shiro discovers it. He likes the idea of cooking for Shiro. He likes the concept of himself and this man in front of him cuddling up together on a wide lawn chair and enjoying the gradual heat of the summer sun wrapping around them, before eventually dipping back inside and curling up together to sleep

away the day with Keith.

“I think I’d be okay with that, even if we still moved around.”

Shiro doesn’t remark on this comment, but Lance can still feel him watching. He nibbles on his toast, eyes lazily sliding from waitress to waitress and to the plates that they’ve set in front of patrons, the ugly wallpaper, the scuffed tile on the floor. He watches the girls checking out tickets at the counter, the assortment of freshly baked cakes behind fingerprint-smudged glass just underneath. It’s brighter today than it has been, but everything here is still bathed in the ever-present gray. Desaturated in a way that makes this scene feel sucked of life, as though everybody moving through here is an animation set on a loop. A waitress moving soullessly through the aisles. An old man paying his bill. Lance is tired of living in this half-asleep town. He’s ready to finally wake up.

“You don’t have to keep worrying about me. I know what I want and that’s… you. Both of you. I want this and I’m ready to commit to it. So we don’t have to keep stalling. When you’re ready to leave, I’ll talk to Veronica. I’ll get everything sorted out, then we can go. I know… you keep thinking that I’m going to regret leaving, but I’m not happy here. I’d regret staying here, too, so I might as well just get out and deal with whatever the consequences are, you know? Like… just be certain forever that at least I made a decision. Because there isn’t a chance that I’ll be happy if I stay here, but there’s a chance that I’ll be happy if I leave. So even if I regret it… at least I tried, right? At least… even if I end up miserable, I’ll never be stuck wondering if things would have worked out differently, like… feeling as though any of the choices that I’d made could have actually changed anything. Because I’ll know. Even if I regret it, at least I’ll know.”

Shiro is watching him closer now, his shoulders eased down and his brows low. He’s still not frowning, still barely offering a small smile and he takes a moment to breathe deeply, to shrug and turn his head away and set his fork back down on his plate.

“You’re a lot different than I am, Lance,” he says softly, eyes caught on the gray clouds floating through the gray sky, “The only thing that I could think of when Keith offered me an alternative was, *‘I don’t want to die’* —and maybe that’s not a fair comparison because you aren’t dying right now, but… I was never hopeful like you are. I didn’t even have anything to live for back then. I survived because I was supposed to. I was afraid to stop living because it was my natural instinct, as a human, to want to stay alive.

But I didn't *want* for anything else as you do, I didn't… have a purpose, or *yearn* for a purpose. I didn't realize what I was getting myself into, and even if I had, I wouldn't have understood the depth of it. I wouldn't have known that… someday I'd have something that was worth living for. Someday… I'd meet someone who I wouldn't hesitate to die for. I don't think I'll ever understand how people find places for themselves or how they connect to each other or find a purpose, but I do understand how it feels to care about someone like Keith. How he's… special. And he makes you want to take care of him, to protect him and help him, but… I think part of him knows that, too, when he allows himself to be seen. He was interested in you from the first moment that we moved here and he got out of the car and saw you watching him. As though he could have known what kind of person you are because… I think he did. And I think, in some way, he must have sensed that goodness in you. He must have known that you'd be good for us. Even if, consciously, he didn't understand it."

Shiro stops only to take another drink. Lance watches him closely, studies the way that his big fingers can barely fit through the handle, how he pauses for a short moment to blow the steam rolling from the surface before taking a sip. He watches how careful Shiro is as he sets the mug back on the table, and he thinks about how Shiro doesn't understand himself. How after all this time, he's never managed to fully grasp just how amazing of a person he really is. How he's a stranger taken up vacancy in an unfamiliar skin, and how even all these years later, he's somehow managed to avoid staring at himself in the mirror long enough to capture even the rawest essence of what Keith, once upon a time, must have seen in him too.

Lance clears his throat, sighing quietly and pushing his half-empty plate further into the center of the table, lacing his fingers together and resting them on the empty spot that he's made just in front of him.

"Keith saw something in you, too," he says, leveling Shiro with a look so steeped in the determination and passion that Shiro is apparently so bewildered by that Shiro doesn't dare challenge him or interrupt him —and he won't, Lance knows, he can see that in the widened surprise of his eyes. "You really need to stop being so hard on yourself, because you're smart, and you're really nice, and you aren't super condescending or annoying like… someone who's been around as long as you have probably should be. Keith didn't save you because he felt sorry for you and he definitely isn't following you everywhere and listening to you and stopping himself from hurting people just because you're like, so powerful or whatever that you're forcing him. He's

doing it because he loves you. Because… he sees something in you that matters to him, that makes *you* matter to him. And he's not stupid! Keith's… yeah, I mean, not a person and he's pretty weird because he doesn't really know how to be a person very well—"

Shiro at least has the decency to laugh at this joke, and Lance stops for a brief moment to offer him a wry smile in return.

"—but, I mean… you said he only hurts bad people, right? Like… he's able to sense things about people and figure out if he should trust them. So… if you were so bad, why would he save your life? Why would he travel with you everywhere? He said that you taught him everything that he knows about humans and… you taught him how to care about people. In a hundred and fifty years, he never met a single person that he cared enough about to spend time with and… in nineteen, I've never met someone as... "

Lance bites his lip. His cheeks feel dreadfully hot now, and he finds that it's impossible to meet Shiro's eyes. His voice cracks at the end of that sentence and it feels as though suddenly all of the compliments humming in his chest have gotten lodged up in his throat. Like a traffic jam of every nice thing that he's ever thought about Shiro, frenzied and far too eager to tumble out at the same time. They thrum within him incessantly, despite how mortified he suddenly feels at the mere prospect of blurting out every embarrassing feeling that he's had for Shiro over these last few months all at once.

"Y-you're just… great, okay? I… I like you a lot."

It's far less eloquent than anything currently churning inside of him, but he feels as though perhaps his feeble mortal body just isn't strong enough to withstand the force of every emotion fighting for attention inside of him. He could tell Shiro that he feels like sunlight in a gray-bathed world and that he's warm and comforting and soft in ways that a person has never felt to Lance in his life. He could tell Shiro that he often finds himself fantasizing about how that big hand might feel on his skin and how his dark eyes might look up close, and how soft and warm and wonderful his lips might feel against Lance's in his most forbidden dreams.

And he could tell Shiro, perhaps, about his frequent passing thoughts of the two of them enjoying the beach or sitting on a balcony bathed in morning light, or wrapped together around Keith among a mess of sheets in a dark room with blacked out windows, and how overwhelmingly wonderful it might feel to find himself allowed to

spend an eternity with a person and a monster who both make him feel as though life is less about trudging through unhappiness, half asleep, and more about seizing the endless pleasures of existence and learning slowly to become the best version of Lance McClain.

But he elects to keep it simple. Because this is only their first date.

And Shiro laughs when it's clear that he isn't going to offer much more than that, and lifts Lance's plate to slide atop his own empty one. He pushes both of them back into the center of the table and continues to take gradual drinks of his coffee. And when the waitress comes to leave the check, Shiro pays for both of them. Lance frets and argues, but only once she leaves does Lance take this opportunity to argue his point of view.

"You can't go wasting your money on random stuff like this when we're going to move soon. We need all of the money that we can save, right?"

Shiro's expression is blank for a long moment. He drums his fingers against the table, stopping only once it seems that a realization has finally struck him and that, all along, he might have thought that Lance was in on some big non-secret that he clearly has no idea about.

"Keith didn't say anything? I thought one of us would have mentioned it… I'm sorry, Lance. I hope you haven't been worried about money this whole time." Shiro's expression is serious now, as he slips his copy of the receipt from the book and pockets it. As he scrawls down a number that, to Lance, is ludicrously high in the tip section of the waitress's copy and tucks that back into its slot. "My parents were very wealthy when they were alive. When I became an adult, I was entitled to a large stipend that they'd been saving for my college expenses, but… when Keith and I left, I didn't exactly need to spend it on rent or tuition anymore. For a short period, I was close enough to home that I could sneak back and withdraw the amount that they would send me. I think forwarding that money to me might have been my mother's way of never giving up on me, or… maybe she actually checked the balance and was positive that I was withdrawing from the account. I'll never be sure. I never saw her again after I disappeared."

Shiro takes another drink. His mug is nearly empty, but Lance realizes that it's a nervous tic. It seems that, while talking about the subject of his parents, and his mother, specifically, that clearly bothers him, he needs to keep his hand busy to distract himself from the words that gradually slip past his lips.

“After some time passed, it wasn’t safe enough to stay in that part of the country anymore. So I withdrew as much of this money as I could. But traveling with cash is dangerous and bank accounts can be traced very easily. Before the invention of temporary money cards, it wasn’t easy to be wealthy but still secretive. So I invested a lot of it—I thought of that old hypothetical about if you could travel back in time, most people claim that they’d invest in something or buy a savings bond. So I did. And I’d pay some money into those things over the years, under different names. The savings bonds expired a few years ago, so they weren’t collecting interest anymore. So… it’s a convenient nest egg. These days, my funds are managed by a trustworthy acquaintance of an acquaintance, so when she sends me a new identity, I have the proper name on my accounts to match it.”

His laugh is short and lighthearted, but Lance feels as though the bottom of his reality has just been dropped out. A sense of vertigo overtakes him, and fearfully, he can’t stop himself from asking a question that in hindsight, he realizes is very rude and very inappropriate.

“How… how comfortable are we talking here?”

Shiro’s grin grows wider and more amused. He pushes up from the table and waits a moment for Lance to rise to shaky and uneven feet.

“Give or take,” Shiro tells him, “A decade’s worth of classes at Harvard. This lifestyle isn’t very expensive, save for the identity changes. We save a lot of money on electricity and groceries and… most things.”

Lance stumbles after him as he heads for the door. He isn’t sure why he always imagined that the two of them were only living at that apartment because they couldn’t afford anything better, and not because a quiet, inconspicuous place like that would surely be more private than somewhere nicer. If Lance thinks about it, his neighbors have always kept to themselves, but he knows that if they were paying more for rent, if everyone were given a reason to care if the complex looked bad or if someone was committing crimes around them, or if they expected a level of safety and security from their home that someone like Shiro would threaten… he knows that it makes sense. He knows that secrecy often requires a person to live well below the means that they can afford. But he can’t shake the shock that he continues to feel nonetheless. He can’t help but feel as though he’s suddenly been given indisputable proof that Santa has been real all along and the fat man himself has gifted him a winning lottery

number just for being such a very good boy all these years.

He swallows thickly, shivers when the cold from outside immediately washes out the warmth that had wrapped around him in the diner.

Outside, in the distance, he can hear cars driving and crows cawing and conversations just far enough away to be indistinct. He hears the crunch of gravel under Shiro's shoes and someone's electronic lock beeping as they click the button on their keys. The snow and ice underfoot are slippery and uneven. The air is thin and frigid and stings like menthol in his lungs.

Shiro fumbles with the key in the lock of his car and steps aside to usher Lance inside.

And Lance laughs again at the sorry state of the interior, waits until Shiro slides in next to him and tells him, shaking his head, "If you're so loaded, man, you really need to get yourself a new set of wheels before we leave."

Sanda shuts off her engine, drumming her fingers against the steering wheel for a moment as she draws in a long breath. She allows the frustration bubbling in her chest to ease out, reminding herself that anything worth fighting for takes time. This isn't going to happen overnight, and inevitably, her patience is going to pay off. Someday, she'll see Ryou Yamazaki and Lance McClain in handcuffs. Someday they'll get their just desserts.

But, for now, she still has a job to do. And today's job is returning to the office to check in with one of the secretaries, who called her just as she was collecting data about the newly covert McClain-Yamazaki case to let her know that a package had arrived for her.

This allegedly important package might be related to a myriad of things, really. She's working a case at the moment that's just as mundane as the answer is obvious, but her boss had assured her that her due diligence was what would eventually win it for their attorney. It's a simple property damage case, just rowdy kids caught stealing snacks from a vending machine downtown after crushing the glass with rocks. They're suspected now of being responsible for the other property damage that's become so commonplace here that store

owners and homeowners alike have given up even attempting to replace their broken lights. It's a big leap to take, from chip theft to serial lamp destruction, but admittedly nowhere near as extreme as the bounds that she's taken to reach her current hypothesis, that Lance McClain and Ryou Yamazaki are two outlaws in cahoots.

The problem with such a case is that no human is capable of cracking a few of those glass casings around the street lamps and high above on shopfront marquees without needing to expend a certain amount of determination and time that would guarantee that they'd be seen or heard before they finished. Sanda isn't particularly worried about the lights, doesn't know why or how they'd be pertinent in comparison to the real cases that actually mattered, but she'd cased the streets last night and waited to find anything out of the ordinary. She'd watched the buzzing blue lights fitted above a store downtown, sat around with binoculars, kept a close watch on the bulbs that never so much as jittered or sputtered out throughout the night. She'd ordered a set of brighter bulbs to set up in her next spot later tonight, decided that perhaps the culprit was only attracted to lights bright enough to actually illuminate the streets. She didn't know why they cared so much or what the point was of such an elaborate prank, but she isn't compelled enough by the reasoning behind it to pay it much mind.

She'll duck her head and continue to trudge through these tedious assignments. She'll make her bosses believe that she's taken the Sendak case's closing at face value and abandoned the prospect of continuing the personal investigation that was obvious to anyone who witnessed her corkboard setup back in her office. Privately, she'll continue to pick at it until she's given the proper opportunity to strike. And hopefully, when that time comes, she'll have enough proof moving forward that not even her most critical of peers will be able to doubt her claims anymore.

At the moment, she shoves through the front door of the station. She offers her badge and identification and places her things in the plastic container as she moves through the metal detector. When she finishes, she collects everything and distributes it back into its places, sighing in annoyance and remembering a time when security wasn't so stiff, and wondering if the imaginary safety is really worth the inconvenience in her day-to-day life.

She moves through the lobby into the back room, through a long hallway that leads her to the furthest offices, until she reaches the secretary's desk, like a guard tower, stationed just at the wide mouth of the detective's hall. The secretary sits straight in her chair, poised

and attentive and, aggravating enough, stuck in the middle of a phone call. She's a young woman who Sanda admittedly has never paid much mind. Attractive if not made up too provocatively for Sanda's tastes. Lean, with a narrow, thin jaw and dark-painted lips, and lashes long and thick that score black shadows down her cheeks under the harsh fluorescents overhead. She's a straight-shooter with a firm and uninflected tone of voice. Sanda likes that she doesn't mess around with pleasantries or false friendliness. Sanda prefers her to some of the other secretaries, who seem more invested in whatever whims filter through their empty heads than actually doing their job correctly.

She clears her throat, and the secretary raises a finger, as though to tell her to hold on. The conversation seems to be winding down, but each wasted moment drums like firing pin at the back of her skull. Two, three, four, five—she'll fire off soon. She'll explode. This case will fly through her fingers and those horrible men will take even more innocent victims and she could have stopped them, had some idiotic officer ended their call with her secretary sooner.

Sanda purses her lips, hands on her hips. She leans slightly to one side to peer down the hall, to watch her co-workers moving about their days as hers has been regretfully stalled for this annoying, inconvenient distraction. She listens to the monotone voice that the secretary confirms her conversation in, before pausing, thanking the caller, and clicking the phone back into the cradle.

"Sorry ma'am," the secretary says firmly, leaving no room for Sanda to bicker or complain, with confidence that Sanda has always respected about her, "A package arrived for you from the DNA labs. They said they'd need you to call them back to check in after you look over the contents."

The secretary then offers her a box—long and flat and clasped between her fingers with their blunted nails and chipping dark polish. Sanda takes it quickly, eyeing the label and feeling a spike of excitement shoot through her chest. The secretary nods then, tapping the top of the box where she'd scribbled a phone number.

"Don't get your hopes up. It didn't sound good from the phone call."

Sanda sighs, gripping the box closer to her chest. Bad news is better than no news, she supposes. And if the prints don't match anything, that can only lead her further in the right direction. She knows that Yamazaki is somehow responsible for all of this. They don't even have any fingerprints from either of the cases to compare his to. She'd just

thought, at the time, that it would be useful to have the prints saved for personal use. That perhaps, if she could get even the smallest leg up in this almost-case, it would propel her closer to her goal of uncovering something more substantial that she might actually be able to present as solid proof.

This sort of evidence won't hold up in court, no, but maybe it'll get her to a point where she can find something that will. Maybe, if anything, she can prove to herself in some way that Yamazaki isn't who he says that he is. That he's moved from more places than just Florida, and he's been active in the hot spots where the other crimes in the past have blipped on her radar.

"Thank you, Acxa," she says distantly, turning quickly and setting off towards her own office, "Please take a message for any of my calls that are unrelated to this."

Acxa's "yes ma'am" is ignored by her. She doesn't have time for greetings or goodbyes, no time to make friends here. No time for anything that doesn't involve coming just another step closer to sinking her proverbial teeth into Ryou Yamazaki and refusing to let go until her peers finally take this case seriously enough to pursue it.

Once she arrives in her office, she locks the door behind her. The deadbolt clicks heavily into its spot, and the quiet buzzing of her computer and the click of the lights are distant and muted as the excited adrenaline chugs through her veins.

She makes a beeline straight to her desk and drops the package in the center of a messy pile of papers, fumbling around to find a box cutter in the crowded drawers and settling instead on a pair of scissors that she nearly drops in her haste. The files inside of the box don't make much sense to her, seem to be littered with so much jargon that it's impossible for her untrained eye to decipher any meaning from it. But there isn't a match listed to anything in their prior database—no links to old job applications or background checks, no date of birth from a possible prior identity, and far too many strange terms that cause more dread to pool in her chest than they confirm to her that, yes, this will somehow be information that she can use to further her case.

She scrambles to grab her phone, to read the messy digits scribbled on the top of the box in the muted light of her shadowed office and punch them into the number pad. The line thrums for a few moments, and a voice answers her, and before she can even greet this person or confirm her identity, she finds herself barking a harsh, "None of these

papers make any sense. Who the Hell does this fingerprint belong to?"

There's a short pause. The speaker on the line clears their throat, seemingly so thrown off by her brusque entrance into this phone call that they need to take a few seconds to compose themselves.

More wasted time.

More dead bodies.

Sanda feels like she's a Works Bomb expanded and ready to explode.

"This is Detective Sanda, correct?"

She confirms so much with a grated "yes", finding that she's already grown tired of waiting for this response, but knowing that it won't do any good to burn this bridge before she's even procured the desired information.

"This is Dr. Ryner from the DNA lab. My team attempted to identify the sample that you sent us, however… there was an issue with the sample. We're still trying to figure out what went wrong."

Sanda presses her fingers just between her brows, pushing out a sharp breath and tipping back her head. She grips the phone receiver tighter in her shaking hand, eyes fallen on the cork board just across her office and vision honing in on Yamazaki's arrogant, infuriating face, smiling in a grainy photograph that she'd had resized and printed large enough that his cockiness would forever propel her further and further with along this case.

Now, it just seems to taunt her.

"What in the world could have possibly gone wrong with it?"

Dr. Ryner cuts off a sentence that she starts, stopping once again and taking another moment to seemingly compose her. Her voice crackles on the line and Sanda nearly hangs up, so finished with this interaction at this point that it's barely worth it to continue on, when she knows that she has nothing to gain from it.

"I've never seen anything quite like it, to be frank with you. We attempted to map the prints, but the moment that we started the process, the data would corrupt. The saliva samples were contaminated, but… not in the manner that we usually see in this lab. Generally, when a sample becomes corrupted, it's because—"

“I don’t need a science lesson, doctor. Just tell me what’s wrong with it.”

Dr. Ryner is quiet for another moment. When she speaks again, her voice is stiffer, more reserved and less mystified, as though Sanda’s impatience has suddenly offended her.

Sanda doesn’t have time to feel bad about it. She doesn’t have time for anything that won’t help this case.

“The DNA that we extracted from that cup wasn’t entirely human, but it wasn’t animal either. I took the liberty of sending our findings to a colleague of mine who specializes in animal DNA, but… he found that each strand was perhaps slightly related to existing species—crocodiles and vampire bats, various types of birds and mammals—but… it’s nothing that he’s seen before either. This might be suggestive of a new species of animal that we’ve never seen before, but… those cells continued to evolve. As though… at any given moment, there was no atrophy or cell death, just… a sort of immortality that we rarely see beyond certain types of crustaceans and tardigrades. Nothing even remotely possible for a larger animal. Definitely no mammalians or reptiles and no creature that’s native to this ecosystem. Are you sure that you recovered that evidence from a human? The only way that this sample could be taken from a person would be if…”

“They weren’t actually a person.”

Sanda finds herself staring at the photo of Yamazaki on the cork board long after she hangs up the phone. She takes in the severe slope of his hard jaw and the lazy uplifting of his lips, the sad and muted eyes, the thick brows. A handsome face for a monster, but a monster that she isn’t sure she even believes in. This finding could be nonsense. It could be nothing but contamination from the company that sent the to-go mugs. It could be something bizarre and nearly unheard of but ultimately mundane and inconsequential. She isn’t sure how far down the rabbit hole of conspiracies she’s quite willing to delve. She isn’t sure if she’s insane enough, at this point, or driven so mad by the fruitlessness of this case to start conjuring beasts from sinister people, or to begin believing in the ghost stories that never even scared her when she was a child.

But her eyes gradually flick to the photo just next to Yamazaki’s, of Lance McClain, holding his young relative. Of the radiance that he exudes and the slight tip of his head. The shortly-cropped bangs blown

in a gentle winter breeze and the way that his dark skin glows golden in the bright spotlight of the sun above him. She thinks about how broken and quiet and distant he might have been at his parents' funeral, thinks about how young his older sister had been when she'd become a mother. How he'd been saddled with parenthood when he was only still a child himself. How his life, pre-mapped and doomed from the start, felt a lot more like a snake swallowing its own tail than a straight line of a hopeful existence started small and grown bigger and better and more brilliant as he grew up.

Lance McClain was fucked from the beginning. From the moment that his parents passed away, there wasn't any hope for him left anymore.

She thinks about the blood at the scene of the accident, the twinkling toys baying their last swan songs as their broken batteries combusted. She thinks about the McClain woman's pulverized face and the way that the gear shift had slammed through her husband's chest, how their insides had spilled out onto the white snow and stained it dark and deep red. How she can never see the snowfall without thinking of it, of them, quiet and unmoving and encapsulated in that final moment of stilted breathing until inevitably their light faded, the paramedics arrived far too late. And Sanda, so much younger, so experienced but so fresh-faced in the presence of real tragedy, had frozen in place.

She can still remember the way that the McClain mother had reached for her with breathless, open lips and wide, glassy eyes. How maybe she'd needed comfort in her final moments, or how she'd been seeing her sons or her daughters where Sanda stood instead. She sees that woman's pale and agonized face when she sees Lance, imagines that perhaps there's a bitterness that exists inside of him, exacerbated by forces in this world that he could never understand. The town let down his parents, the ambulance arrived too late. They hadn't salted the roads in time, and Sanda had stood there and allowed his parents to die alone and scared and cold. She'd watched as Lance's mother's hand had fallen quietly in the snow. Listened to the phlegm heave of her breath coated in blood and tears and mucous and slicked over her mutilated expression like a movie monster from Sanda's greatest nightmares. Sanda, having witnessed this final moment of Lance's parents' lives, she knows that she owns them, to some degree. That moment is hers and hers alone, the burden that she carries, the "what if" that will haunt her as long as she's forced to exist in a space occupied, too, by that wretched child and his familiar smile, and a face that she knows would look the same as his mother's if she crushed it beneath a few thousand pounds of steel.

And she hates that he should hate her for this, hates that she can't exist in her regret and mourning without the constant reminder of his face, too similar to his mother's, always popping up around town when she least expects it. Always knocking the oxygen from her lungs as she imagines that his parents felt winded, too, upon the first impact with the slippery, jagged mountain ridge.

She doesn't want to admit to herself that catching Lance McClain in the act of something horrible might absolve her guilt, if only she could convince herself that he's capable of doing something so terrible. She doesn't want to confess even to herself that she needs for him to be culpable because maybe, then, she wouldn't have a good reason to regret ruining his life.

She doesn't want to tell anyone that she only cares about any of this because she hates him, despises him so wholly because she isn't strong enough to truly hate herself for everything that she did and everything that she so pathetically failed to do.

But deep down, she does.

She'll deny it again and again, but she does.

But that won't stop her from getting to the bottom of this. It won't stop her from seeing this through to the end.

Her feelings, her wants and needs, and her own perpetual agony consistently revolving around that horrible McClain boy—

They won't stop her from doing what's right. And now, she's getting closer.

Chapter End Notes

> Another long one... I'm so sorry about the inconsistent chapter lengths! I promise not all of the final chapters are going to be this long.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It’s cold tonight.”

Lance rubs his gloved hands together, stopping only to breathe into the cup that he’s made with his palms. He proceeds then to stroke rapidly over his arms, shivering as he makes a “brrr” sound with his lips and holding back his head to gaze upward at the black sky and the slow snowfall gradually floating down to the ground. This minimal amount of movement affords him, at least, a small increase in body temperature, but nothing nearly enough to abate the shivers that continue to wrack through him.

Shiro, next to him, laughs softly. He’s holding a cigarette between his fingers just in front of his lips, watching Lance with dark and hooded, tired eyes as he stamps his feet about and struggles to collect more body heat.

“Do you really not get cold?” Lance asks him then, his words nearly vibrating with the force at which he’s shaking now, and Shiro laughs at that too. Takes a long drag and settles more comfortably against the wall behind him with eyes never leaving Lance’s pink cheeks.

Lance will claim if asked, maybe, that he’s only so red because of the cold, but in reality, it’s just hard to be looked at by Shiro without feeling as though he’s been put under an incredibly intense, glaring and concentrated spotlight. Without finding himself dizzied and winded and wholly possessed by the attention graced to him by such a substantial and handsome and charmingly wonderful person. It’s difficult to exist under Shiro’s gaze for long before he flicks his eyes away. It’s nearly impossible to do so without blowing a short breath through his teeth that hangs in the dark air in front of him for long quiet moments while Shiro takes a drag of his cigarette.

“I do still get cold,” Shiro tells him, “Maybe not as cold as humans can, but stimulus isn’t totally lost on me. Keith gets cold too, you know. I was surprised when I figured that out.”

Lance clicks his tongue, holding himself tighter. Even the mere mention of Keith’s name fills him with embarrassment, and he feels

the weight of everything still left unsaid settled firmly on his shoulders. They'd left the middle school the other night without many words to fill the awkward and excitedly energetic silence still popping between them. Keith had seen Lance off safely to his apartment before disappearing into the dark fog residually left behind by the then-dead fireworks in pursuit of, he'd assumed, his own bed for the night. Lance still doesn't know if Keith told Shiro what happened—what they'd talked about while Lance cleaned or that they'd kissed when he'd taken a break—but he definitely hasn't brought it up, neither of them has. And every time that Lance considers mentioning it, his tongue feels dreadfully fat and rubbery and frightfully weighed in his mouth. His eyes feel itchy and too dry. His palms sweat and his heart races, and he wonders if it's even possible to articulate the words without abruptly dying of embarrassment.

So, once again, instead of addressing it as he's so painfully aware that he'll eventually need to, he turns his eyes away, watching a lone car pulling from the street into the complex. He can't spot Sanda's black vehicle in the dark now, but Shiro seems confident that she isn't anywhere nearby, or that there would be anything even remotely interesting about the two of them standing out here together after their date just a week ago, or the frequency at which they've been meeting up since then.

Shiro's plan to fabricate a totally natural relationship has worked well enough at this point that sometimes, Lance almost forgets that there's more truth under the facade. He meets up with Shiro and chats idly about the mundane day-to-day that distracts them. He spends many nights meeting up with Keith and spending quiet hours together saying next to nothing. Just enjoying each others presence. Just filling the empty time with each other until Keith dissipates into the black in pursuit of a small meal in the woods or whatever adventures he partakes in where Lance and Shiro can't follow.

"His threshold for getting chilly must be pretty high then."

His tone is sour, manufactured to be so, but he has to admit privately that he's surprised to hear it. Keith, if anything, seems to be a creature that exists most nights just beyond the realm of reality, barely affected and frequently untouched by changes in the weather, of all things. The way that he generally traverses the night—at one point in that coat that Lance realizes he hasn't seen since Christmas, and now in that too-short t-shirt that continues to plague Lance's mental health—might have led Lance previously to assume that he's more like the doll that he resembles than an actual human being, or a creature that can

get sick or be tired or feel hunger beyond blood lust, but… this only makes him wonder how cold it would need to be to get Keith to snuggle up with them. And he wonders if that's exactly how Shiro discovered this interesting quirk in the first place.

"I think he likes to be warm more than he cares about being cold, but I can't say that with certainty. If I ask him to draw his own bath, he turns up the heat more. It's tepid, still, but less than freezing. And, *well* … he prefers to sleep with me more than he likes being by himself, but…"

Lance laughs, barks it too loudly into the quiet and covers his mouth as more hot color scores under his cheeks. His voice bounds through the empty crevice of the barren courtyard, and dampens thankfully against the piles of snow before it can wake anyone up. He checks around, neck craned out and hands shoved bashfully in his pockets to see if any lights come on in the windows, but the scene around them remains unchanged for a long stretch of silence. He shakes his head, hissing a quick sigh of relief.

Then, he turns a small half-smile up at Shiro, watching him curiously.

"I think that's just because he likes you."

Shiro, too, has gained just a little bit of color to his skin. He scoffs a laugh and turns his eyes away, taking another long drag until he runs the stick down to the filter and puts it out against the bricks. Then, as usual, he tucks it into that tiny paper envelope that he keeps in his coat pocket. Lance thinks about how many things have changed and stayed the same since they met. He wonders how many years it might take the ingrain this image of Shiro standing in the dark in the back of his thoughts always, poised and picturesque as he flicks his lighter at the tip of the next cigarette that he's set gently between his lips. Inhaling in a single, long drag before puffing out a smoky breath and fluttering his long lashes over the high, empty hollows of his cheekbones as he enjoys the new rush of nicotine that courses through him.

Lance diverts his attention, allowing Shiro this moment of peace without words. He wonders what he's needing a break from today, why he's smoked so much and stayed quieter. He wonders what annoys Shiro about his job and his coworkers and what he'll be sad to leave behind. And if, like himself, Shiro has regrets about life here that keep him shackled contentedly until Lance says the final word and they can leave it all behind for good.

He tips his head back, breathing deeply. He allows his gaze to settle on the shadowed edges of the rides at the park just across the courtyard, wondering if the creaking of the breeze pushing through them might be Keith climbing over them, or if maybe he's taken the opportunity tonight, instead, to travel through the trees as he so often seems to prefer.

Lance listens to the sound of Shiro's lighter clicking closed and the shuffling of his coat pockets as he shoves it back inside. And he relaxes somewhat, grows more acclimated to the cold and draws backward to rest himself against the brick wall where Shiro leans, as well, picking through the dark sky in search of the stars that seem to have been engulfed in Keith's darkness as well.

He wonders if this place will seem brighter once they're gone. He wonders if the only reason why things have become especially droll lately might be the exact person that he's itching to leave with. And if perhaps every destination that they reach on the map might someday seem just as cold and aimless, but… he forces himself to stop being so pessimistic. Shiro hasn't warned him that they'd be a perpetual rain cloud hanging over each town that they blow into. He has to believe that things can get better than this.

And Lance knows that the night, sometimes, can be dark and treacherous, but he knows that the sun will rise soon anyway. There's a new day on the horizon for each of them, a new and tempting better life that he has to believe in. A new dream to chase and a chance to do something better with himself that he'd ever dreamed was possible, and…

Even if the next place is dark like this, maybe that will be okay too, because he won't be there alone. He won't be there forever, by himself.

Shiro, next to him, confirms that as he reaches out and rests a warm hand on his shoulder.

"Is everything okay?" He asks, and Lance smiles, feels wetness in the corners of his eyes, feels like a stupid child for getting so emotional over something as simple and silly as this.

"Y-yeah," he croaks, "I guess I'm just… really excited to leave. Like, sad, too, but… I'm so sick of being cold. I want to see the beach again, I wanna feel sand under my feet. I wanna do all of that with you guys, and… Learn how much Keith likes cuddling and stuff, you know? I'm

so ready to just start living again. To leave this behind and… actually do something with my life instead of waiting around here."

Shiro's expression doesn't change substantially as he listens to Lance ramble, and his hand doesn't stray from Lance's arm either. The cigarette hanging from his lips collects a long strand of ash at the end that breaks off, falling and catching in a divot of the material at the front of his coat as he takes another step closer. But he pays it little mind, watches Lance instead with his whole focus, with the attentiveness of a man who doesn't care that the remaining, still-lit nub of a cigarette slips free from his lips and tumbles to the ground as well, buried under the sole of his shoe in the snow. He touches Lance with the tenderness and affection of someone brushing timid fingers over the broken wing of a butterfly and wondering how he might help it fly again.

Shiro wraps an arm around Lance and pulls him close to his chest. His chin tucks Lance's face into his neck. He's warm and soft and firm enough that Lance feels, profoundly, that he's an anchor to this moment that won't allow him to slip away. Lance has never understood when people say that someone makes them feel "safe" as well as he does now. He's never felt more tethered to another living being as he feels to Shiro, arms limp and loose around his wide torso, eyes damp and buried into the collar of Shiro's coat as he considers how many times he'll be able to experience this exact moment for the rest of his eternity. He can hear the soft patter of Shiro's heart through the padding of his coat, even and quiet and belated like a clock slowly running out of battery.

Shiro is an eternal thing, he knows this, but in these moments, he can't help but wonder why he always seems so close to being dead.

"I'm excited for that too," Shiro tells him, "I think it's about time that we all learned how to move on, and… Keith told me about what happened with you two, and… I'm really happy, Lance. You've been good for him, and for me. I think for the first time in my life, I actually feel like… like the future might be better. And that's because of you."

Lance swallows thickly, his fingers shaking as he tightens loose and uncertain arms around Shiro, as they bury into the fabric of his coat and cling to him. Lance breathes in the tobacco smell perpetually clinging to Shiro's clothes—the small hints of soap and body wash, the starchy, potent scent that often lingers in hospitals. He can feel the darkness around them baying and churning and thriving with a newly

introduced lifeforce that only manages to make him feel more comfortable. He doesn't know when he stopped being a kid who needed a night light and when he grew to a young adult who preferred to toil away his limited free time outside in the dark. He doesn't know when the blackness and the whispering started feeling comforting, like a warm hand that Keith could never offer on his skin. Like an embrace that might always feel just a little bit like squeezing a life-sized doll if he were to be bold enough to take Keith up in his arms again.

But he can feel Keith somewhere off in the distance, can feel Shiro's warmth wrapped around him and shielding him from the chill of the late winter air.

And when Shiro eases back, when Lance finds himself winded and dazzled and dizzied as he gazes up into Shiro's dark eyes, his soft words feel like honey melting in tea. So sweet and so careful, gentle, and warm that it takes every ounce of Lance's inner-strength to nod in confirmation instead of just standing here, leaning his weight into Shiro and finding himself far too swept up in the moment to move even an inch.

"Can I kiss you too?"

Of course, is what Lance would say if he were better at this.

You didn't even have to ask.

Shiro's lips are gentle and warm, maybe just a little dry but still perfect as they slot against Lance's. He tastes like cigarettes and his breath on Lance's cheeks is dewy and hot. His pulse patters wildly and mingles with Lance's, his hand on the small of Lance's back is big and heavy and keeps him upright even when his knees dissolve into jelly. The two of them, wrapped in an inky night and surrounded by a cacophony of chirping bugs and cooing birds and a monster's whispers closing in, they're alone out here, in the spotlight of their blossoming relationship. In just another first step down a long and winding path that will inevitably unfurl forever, uninhibited by the passing of time or a universe forever changing.

Lance grasps tighter at the thick material of Shiro's coat.

He kisses back, feels his muscles, like melting wax, weak and nearly buckled underneath him. Shiro keeps him upright, keeps him hitched in the soft reality of their lips touching and their bodies close and Lance's pulse chugging through his veins so rapidly that all coherent

thought grows wings and flies away.

Shiro's mouth feels like something that was always made to connect to his. Shiro's hands feel like hands that were made to hold him.

It's a perfect night. It's a perfect moment.

It's a perfect shot that Sanda, some ways away, captures on her infrared camera.

Shiro doesn't know how to confess to Lance that the opposite of the mess in his car is the outright destitution of their empty apartment and that yes, this duality is actually perfectly possible in one man, if said man is as absolutely hopeless when it comes to making a home *feel* like a home as Shiro always has been, but fortunately, he doesn't have to explain it when Lance follows behind him and his audible gasp expresses his understanding of this concept just fine.

It's strange existing in this space with the lights suddenly illuminating how empty and devoid of any personality it really is, and Shiro hopes that Keith doesn't feel obligated to stay away just because Lance has flipped on the rarely used living room light out of habit, he presumes, more than any urge to witness more of this pathetic and subtly humiliating display than he could have made out in the dark. Each ceiling fan was at one point fitted with three bulbs, but Shiro had the forethought, at least, to remove two from each of them. But it still feels too bright, still washes the empty rooms in overbearing swatches of dampened color and emphasizes just a little too plainly exactly what kind of squalor Keith and Shiro have allowed themselves to live in so far.

"Shiro, this is…"

Shiro can't stop himself from laughing. He shuffles awkwardly as he toes off each of his shoes, distracts himself with shrugging off his coat and squints in the dim light of the living room that still, compared to many days now of navigating this room in total blackness, feels entirely too blinding.

The window at the far side of the living room has been left ajar so Keith can climb inside when he's ready to come home. Lance shivers in place and seems surprised that Shiro's comfortable enough to take off his coat in here, and Shiro decides that maybe, just for tonight, it wouldn't be a bad idea to make use of the heat that so often they've neglected to turn on.

"I'm sorry," Shiro says then, padding the short distance to the thermostat and fiddling with the switches, "I'd have grabbed a bottle of wine or some snacks had I known that we'd be hanging out in here tonight."

Lance tuts, raising a hand and craning his neck to look around, cutting off whatever reassurance he might have thought to say as his eyes pause on the light switch that he flipped when he walked in here to the bulb buzzing overhead and between them. He rubs his hands together quickly, the swoosh of his skin rubbing skin the only sound that fills the air for a few quiet beats as Shiro eyes the thermostat. He's never actually bothered with it before, and had he, at any point, tried to fiddle with it while Keith was here, he isn't sure if he'd have been able to make out the faded numbers on the aged dial in the dark. He finally manages to flip on the heat, turns it to a temperature that he hopes is warm enough for Lance, then clicks it a few higher just in case. The electric bill has been low since they moved in. He wonders if the company will be surprised to see a spike for a single night.

"H-hey, uh, is this gonna bother Keith?"

Lance jerks his chin up at the light. His brows are drawn together and concern is evident in his tight frown.

Shiro's smile spreads wider. His gaze strays to the open window at the shadowed corner of the living room and he leans his back against the wall, just next to the thermostat, and shoves a hand in his pocket. It feels nice to be inside. The cold isn't too bad on its own, but he definitely doesn't like the feeling of that detective watching them. Absolutely dislikes the looming fear that she might step out of line and make a scene with Keith so obviously lingering close by. It's a mixed bag of expectations, and he feels guilty for even addressing it mentally. It would solve a lot of his problems if he'd just allow Keith to take care of everything, but he knows that even a person like Sanda doesn't deserve to die in such a way.

Even that terrible Officer Sendak…

He tries not to think about it.

“He’ll be okay,” Shiro responds eventually, “Artificial light can’t hurt him. He just doesn’t like it very much. His senses are heightened, maybe… *optimized* for living somewhere very dark and quiet without much of a population or light pollution. But places like that are few and far between these days. It’s difficult to find a balance between access to food and privacy. With how he acts about light bulbs, I know it seems like he’s looking out for himself when he breaks them, but… I promise, he’s doesn’t need total darkness to survive.”

Lance nods thoughtfully. Suddenly, he reaches back and the light overhead goes out. Shiro doesn’t feel bad for grinning wider because he knows that Lance won’t be able to make it out. His eyes adjust to the darkness quicker, senses perked just somewhat higher than the average human’s might be. But there’s a part of him that can still remember being introduced to darkness so profound that it seemed more like a solid wall of black than the simple absence of light. He remembers how it had felt during the first fawn-steps of his perpetual half-life, struggling to grow acclimated to the heightened smell and sensitivity, nursing a persistent migraine that buzzed at the back of his thoughts any time that he found himself in a place lit so brightly that he’d felt as though his retinas were burning under it.

He doesn’t tell Lance that he doesn’t care for brightness much either, thinks that perhaps he’ll figure it out on his own someday, when he’s given the same condition. But then that leads him down a harrowing mental path of wondering when and why Keith would change Lance, if it would even be a good idea. And if Keith would even remember how, after all this time, after he’d admitted, when Shiro had asked, that the act itself had been rooted more in his instincts than any knowledge that he’d had about himself or his abilities. He isn’t sure if Lance understands it well enough to make that decision. If he really grasps exactly what eternal life entails, or if Shiro himself would ever feel confident that they made the right call.

This terrible but wonderful thing that’s been done to him… he doesn’t know if he’d do it to someone else. He can’t say that it isn’t worth it or that it *is* without a cloud of doubt, or that Lance wouldn’t grow to resent both of them over time when the years dragged on and he grew tired of the monotony and the running and the fear, and all that he’d want, inevitably, would be to finally die. To see his family again. To rest, once and for all, as Shiro often feels so weary and so tired and in need of sleep longer than a single night.

But if Lance asked that of Keith, for Keith to kill him, Keith wouldn't do it, Shiro knows. He couldn't. He'd be riddled with guilt and fear and agony over the sole concept of it, unable to grasp the idea that someone could love him once and leave him later, and that not every creature in the universe could be plagued with an endless existence as he was so many years ago. Keith wouldn't be capable of comprehending the idea of mercy-killing. He would feel that blood embedded just under the surface of his skin for decades, maybe even the rest of his life. He wouldn't trust again. He wouldn't be strong enough to snap Lance's neck or drain him dry, and even if he was, and he did it, there would be no guarantee that it would work. They've never been in a position to prove it, and for all they know now, it might be permanent. There might be no way, even if they wanted it enough, to undo this gift of Keith's once he's decided to give it.

And Lance would be stuck, as they're all stuck. He'd be trapped in this reality and this endless abyss of black night. And Shiro isn't sure of any of it—what he'll do when the time comes. If he even has a right to make that decision for Lance. If they'll ever be in a position that warrants it, or if Lance might die someday and leave both of them behind to mourn him.

He shakes his head. He needs another cigarette now, but he resists the urge to leave just after they've both settled in.

He can hear Lance groping the wall as he rounds the room and cursing quietly as his foot catches on the blanket cot and he nearly tumbles over.

"Sorry," Shiro says again, "That's our bed. Be careful."

Lance clicks his tongue, and Shiro watches with much interest as the dark mound of him crouches and clumsily seats himself atop the blanket pile. It's quiet for a moment as Lance sits cross-legged and quiet. As he breathes in long and low to calm himself before searching his pocket and procuring his phone. Shiro squints at the glow of it and watches the way that the blue light illuminates Lance's skin, the cute upturn of his nose and his soft lips and the sharp point of his chin. Shiro watches the way that the screen reflects white in his darkened blue eyes. Watches the lax drop of his brows as he reads through a text and sends another. Shiro imagines that he's probably telling Veronica that he might not be back until morning. He wonders if Keith will be surprised when he finally returns here and discovers that the three of them will be spending the night together. That, for once, Shiro actually managed to do something positive for all of them, and

that, of all things, he got Lance into this apartment and made him comfortable enough to stay.

He has a feeling that Keith could have gotten to that point on his own eventually. He's always been better at getting people to do what he wants than Shiro has. Always more open about his feelings and intentions and less inhibited by bashfulness or the cowardice that Shiro so often finds himself encapsulated by.

He wonders if Lance is regretting his decision to suggest that they seek shelter from the growing cold and the heavier snowfall, now that he's realizing that they'll all have to squeeze together on this pathetic pile of blankets on the floor in the center of a rundown, barren apartment. He wonders if Lance has better plans for them, or if he doesn't realize yet that once upon a time, Shiro had more things too. They had enough books to fill a shelf in the apartment. They had a bed and a clunky old television and a few VHS tapes that Keith would watch on an endless repeat until Shiro was sure that he could recite all of *Gone With the Wind* from memory.

But over time, it became too tedious to carry everything along with them. They went through different vehicles and arrived at different backdrops. Shiro stopped reading out loud to Keith. Keith lost interest in the movies. A great distance splintered between them. Life became more about surviving each new hurricane than learning to thrive in less than savory circumstances.

Shiro still remembers the old record player that he sold for thirty dollars at a thrift store in Orlando. He remembers the heaviness of it and how inconvenient it was to hoist into the backseat of the car. The glossy finish over the deep red of the mahogany had become chipped and worn away the more they'd moved it. It scratched often and the needle would jitter over the same words twice. But Keith's eyes, he remembers those too, would widen and brighten and his flat frown would curl up at the edges when Shiro played the right songs. They'd swoop sometimes and bump together in a sloppy semblance of slow dancing that Keith never fully got the hang of, but they'd laugh. And for a moment, in those brief lapses of time, it felt good to be alive. They felt like two normal people unconditionally in love, safe and hidden away from a world that would never understand them, that would never accept them or know the depth of the struggles that they'd overcome to survive in it.

He wonders if Lance likes to dance, if he'd introduce them to his favorite songs.

He wonders if now is the time, once again, to start collecting a home to carry with them and to really start living, in place of the long, endless drags of survival that filled their last few decades with silence and unspoken bitterness.

Shiro twitches when Lance's eyes suddenly shoot up and catch his. A smile rolls over his lips that crack open to reveal a straight row of teeth that glitter in the blue light of his phone. His brows raise, and he says softly, "You know, I'm not sure if I'm disappointed or not that Keith doesn't actually have a coffin."

Shiro snorts, biting his lip soon after and taking a moment to drop himself down on the cot next to Lance. He's far enough away that he's not too pressed into Lance's personal space, but close enough that he can feel the heat of his body emanating through the coat that he still hasn't shrugged off. Around them, the heat whirrs and warm air filters through the vents. In the walls, the oft-skittering rats are clawing away from the noise of it.

"I think he'd like one, truthfully. He likes to sleep in the bathtub, but it's fairly inconvenient when I need to take a shower, or… clean up some animal that I've found. Occasionally, when he isn't feeling well, I'll let him set up the bed in there, but I'm not sure if that would be very comfortable tonight either—squeezing all three of us inside of it."

Lance nods, and eventually, the light of his screen blackens and they're left, momentarily, quiet in the dark. Lance sucks in a short breath, dropping his phone into his lap, stretching out his arms high above his head, and falling back until he settles with a soft 'oof' onto the pile of blankets and pillows layed out behind him. For a moment, neither of them speaks, but Shiro leans back somewhat to admire the way that Lance looks spread out and comfortable on the cot where he's slept every night for the last few months. He has to admit that Lance looks good here, like he's supposed to be here and he might have been the much-needed fixture that this apartment needed all along. The lamps and couches and a bed in the bedroom don't feel as important and rugs and curtains, a kitchen table, a television or fancy housing for the bulbs, they're unimportant when he witnesses Lance's feline smile and the tiny hitch of his breath, the small moan of contentedness that buzzes from him as he makes himself horizontal after a long day's work. Lance is the centerpiece that ties the whole home together, he can see that now. He's so pretty in the center of the room that Shiro feels, almost, as though he's peering not at a person, but at a commercial cast with a handsome model seated here to sell his old threadbare comforters to the masses.

And it's a funny thought, because it's not as though he's ever been very good at decorating, as though he's ever stopped to think of how a room could be feng shuied to feel more like a home. But it's still pleasant now, to think that this is the first of many nights that he'll get to admire this picture. That eventually, maybe, they'll get a bed again. They'll find a way to make a home out of this lifestyle. Lance will look just as comfortable and contented spread out on an expensive mattress with warm, new sheets as he looks right now atop the pile of comforters and blankets that have all seen better days.

"This is a lot more comfortable than it looks," Lance tells him, turning his head awkwardly to catch Shiro's eyes while still refusing to sit up again, "Doesn't Keith freeze you half to death though? I mean… this doesn't seem like enough to warm him up. You ever wake up and he's like… frozen to you or something? You ever see that scene in *Pet Sematary* with the cat?"

There's a half-laugh tucked between those words and Shiro smiles guiltily. He feels bad laughing at a joke at Keith's expense, but he knows that Lance isn't saying this to be mean. It's an honest enough question, and frankly, eventually, it's going to be something that Lance actually needs to consider.

"He actually holds body heat fairly well," Shiro tells him, "Sometimes I'll give him a bath before bed and he's still warm when we both curl up together under the blankets. He'll retain that, usually, as long as he doesn't get up and wander around. And he likes to sleep close, plus, it's not like he has to get up in the middle of the night and go to the bathroom. I'm sure when it's all three of us, me and you can keep him warm all through the night."

Lance swallows then, suddenly shy as he flicks his gaze away. All humor has abruptly been put out, but Shiro can't help but find that incredibly adorable as well. It's been three decades since he and Keith began their routine and far too many days and weeks have passed for it to feel even remotely embarrassing anymore. But Lance is young and he's new at this. And he's been a normal human for too long for any of this to feel second nature when he must surely understand that any normal person would be just a just as nervous when faced with the prospect of spooning with a person that he's been skirting around the prospect of dating for months now.

They aren't quite there yet, Shiro understands. They still have some kinks to work out before everything feels as easy as it could, someday.

And Lance isn't like Keith, like a blank slate gone along with anything that Shiro's willing to teach him. And not like Shiro, a mother bird coaxing her children back into the nest and doting over them, and accepting the affections from them that they feel comfortable offering, even if they're too domestic all at once, considering how little they've gotten to know each other.

Once upon a time, Keith was a monster that had just saved him, and Shiro was the half-human drawn to him not by interest or debt, but by forces that he could never hope to understand. Like a string tied to his heart and tethered to Keith, he couldn't allow himself to return to his old life and stray away from the concentration of hot energy that he could constantly feel pulling him to Keith for too long.

Shiro had attempted, at first, to return to his life as any normal person would. He hadn't made it long enough to return to work, had awoken mutilated and down an arm but in virtually no pain from the impact of it. He'd hidden away in his apartment for two days, lying low, ignoring the calls that blipped on his answering machine and the knocks on his door and doing nothing but sitting wrapped around himself in the dark corner of his apartment as the world outside felt suddenly amplified and too much to even consider confronting.

Keith hadn't come looking for him, and perhaps he hadn't known that he should have been. He'd continued roving through the city at night and Shiro could feel him. He could sense when he was close by and he felt himself tugged in that direction, stalled in his fear and confusion and only compelled out into the night on the third evening, when the hunger set in. When he felt, suddenly, that Keith was going to hunt again.

He'd confronted Keith, spoken with him gently and coaxed him forward. And Keith had seemed put off by how he didn't smell like food anymore, how Shiro didn't seem afraid of him. How Shiro thanked him for saving him and spoke with him sweetly, and offered his arm as a token of his appreciation for Keith to feed from without any prompting or hunting or violence involved at all.

Shiro had found it easy enough to grow comfortable with Keith after that. It had only felt natural to find himself close enough to Keith at all times to still the booming restlessness that churned inside of him when Keith wandered too far away. He'd accepted it when Keith tested the waters, when he drew closer and pressed lips to his own. When eventually, things grew more serious between them and before Shiro knew it, he'd been swept up in emotions for this strange and

fantastic creature that he'd never felt for any human in life.

And Keith, feral and surprisingly timid, had been only too eager to seek out the first warmth and gentleness that was offered to him after scrambling through a loud and disorienting and terrifying life alone for so many years before then.

Shiro doesn't have many human relationships to compare this to. He doesn't know if that first kiss was the biggest step that Lance is willing to partake in tonight, or if he's eager to move things further along now that they're alone and no one is here to witness anything that they do together in the dark.

This, however, doesn't stop Shiro from pushing the envelope, because he decides as he watches Lance in the blackness, laid back and spread out so comfortable and tempting on the bed that he's used every night for the last few months, that he'd very much like to be kissing him again right now. And the only thing stopping him from kissing Lance is the short distance between them and perhaps the permission to touch him, which he asks for gently, soft and husky, as he turns his body and drops down to rest his weight on his belly, propped up with an elbow and hovering just a little ways above Lance's upturned face.

"Would it be okay if I—"

"Yes."

Lance pushes up to bridge the gap between them before Shiro can even sort through his thoughts. Their lips are touching again, and Lance is warmer than anyone who Shiro has kissed in a very long time. He has hot breath and a pulse thrumming through his veins, and soft skin and eyelashes that tickle Shiro's cheeks when he pushes in further. And fingers that spread out in Shiro's hair, over his back. A thin and waifish body that feels like a puzzle piece clicked in place now, slotted against Shiro with short inhales of shaky breath and feeble, embarrassed noises slipping out of him into the small breadth of space between them, and a mouth so intoxicating that Shiro finds himself adrift in the time spent kissing Lance until he loses count of just how many times they've pulled away and met again. Until he isn't totally certain how his hand ended up under Lance's shirt, how Lance's coat ended up discarded some ways away on the floor, how his knee tucked between Lance's legs that part and press against his sides.

This is dangerous, he knows it. Things are moving very, very fast and

he isn't even sure how far Lance is willing to go with him tonight. He isn't sure how Keith might react if he were to slide through the open window just now, but he has a feeling that he might be more likely to tease Shiro about it later than he would be to get mad.

It's a little awkward, balancing his weight on the elbow of the same arm that he's clumsily shoved up into Lance's shirt, attached to the fingers that rove underneath the material blindly, over smooth and unmarked skin. Over the bud of a nipple that elicits a sharp intake of breath from Lance and a jerk of his hips upward, and a smirk of a smile over Shiro's lips before he can even stop himself from becoming too cocky.

"Sh—Shiro—"

Lance's half-words are weighted by need and desperation and Shiro wonders if it would be crueler to stop now than it would be to keep going. He realizes that it's been a very long time since he's messed around with a person who he's unsure of—decades since he last touched a human and only slightly less time since he's actually done this sort of thing with Keith. In murky pre-Keith memories, he can see the flick of light bounding from glasses and a sultry white smile against a blur of dark skin. Curly hair and broad shoulders, words like "I love you" whispered between kisses that felt so soft but spread a dull ache through his chest when he recalls them now. Shiro can't remember the name of that ex-partner anymore, but he can remember how it felt to bury himself inside of him, how it felt to be touched by him and edged to the brink of pleasure. How it felt to sneak around in moments, brief and fleeting, away from prying eyes, when consent was more of an implication and not a full stop that he knows that he has to make now.

Lance, beneath him and hard against his knee, squirms like he's never been touched this way before. The noises that he makes are saccharine and needy and they swirl around in the depths of Shiro's belly like warm coffee amping a spike of energy through his veins. He pulls back from another kiss. His thoughts are so dizzy that he almost can't remember how to form words.

"Lance, h-how much do you… do you wanna do tonight?"

How far do you want to go, do you want to have sex with me? Do you want to go all the way? Do you want me to stop?

There are clearer ways to say it, and his ears burn as Lance's heavy

breathing expands the rib cage under his fingers. Lance's own hands have drifted from his hair to his shoulders, to the dip of his waist into his hips.

He can tell from the heat radiating from Lance's skin and the sound of his heart amplified in Shiro's sensitive ears—the drop of his lids, the turn of his head and his glassy eyes away to a blind spot in the dark apartment—that he's embarrassed. His fingers press firmer into Shiro's skin, and his thighs fall apart, framing Shiro's hips lighter as a moment of silence passes between them.

"Can… can I touch you instead?"

Shiro wasn't expecting that, and maybe it registers on his face. Lance is quick to snap his attention back to Shiro, back into his eyes with widened and panicked ones of his own, shirking back and pushing himself up onto his elbows as though he's ready to spring away and get dressed and leave the moment that Shiro asks him to.

"I-I mean, if… if that's okay, I just… I thought maybe—"

Shiro laughs, leans back on the pads of his feet to give Lance some room and to rest his arm that tingles, pins and needles, once blood begins circulating back through it.

"It's okay, Lance. I just… wasn't expecting that."

Lance sucks in another sharp breath, scooting back until his backside rests on the floor just next to the messy cot. He pats the surface of it, eyes trained on Shiro's face in the dark as he swallows, calms himself, and jerks a chin downward as though to further express what he's trying to convey through actions alone.

"Can you… lay down?"

Shiro can, and he does. He lies on his back with his abdomen level with Lance's position on the floor. He's still dressed save for the coat that he discarded earlier and the shoes that he left under it by the door, and he wonders if Lance would prefer if he undressed first. But he doesn't have a chance to ask this, doesn't have the opportunity to flitter through a few additional conversations that remind him all-too painfully of his awkward college fumblings with a few long-forgotten flings before his half-death, because Lance mounts him unceremoniously, straddles his hips and in one fluid, rough motion, shoves his shirt up to tuck under his armpits.

It feels a whole lot like being manhandled. Lance is so clumsily with him that, for a second, he can't do anything but stare wide-eyed up at him, wondering guiltily if they've invited some kind of secret dominatrix into their relationship.

And at the thought of that—of Lance playing coy all this time but hiding the sinister and sexy intentions that he has for both of them behind that innocent smile and the frequent missteps and embarrassment—he can't stop the laugh that spits out of him. He immediately feels terrible when Lance's expression screws up only tighter in humiliation, but he tries to calm himself down with a hand propped on Lance's arm and teeth buried in his lip, and eyes darted back into the dark to remind himself that Keith could come home any second now, and while the prospect of that is, admittedly, a little exciting to consider, he isn't sure if Lance's tender psyche could withstand that additional embarrassment tonight.

"I-I'm sorry, Lance, really, I didn't… I'm not laughing at you. I'm just nervous. It's been a really long time since I've done this with someone new."

Lance is quiet for a moment, drops his hands to rest lightly over Shiro's belly and twitches, as though surprised by the feeling of another body underneath him once he makes contact. His brows knit close together and he juts out a lip, clenching his fingers gently and pulling up the edges of Shiro's shirt between them.

"You're really… *firm* ." His words are breathless and barely there, "Jesus Christ, Shiro, you're ripped."

Shiro breathes another laugh, feeling suddenly winded as well. Feeling too warm and just a little lightheaded as he slowly gets acclimated to the feeling of Lance's hands on him, his backside planted so close to a shameful hardness pressed into the seam of his pants that Shiro isn't sure if he wants him to notice or not. And sure, in the dark, he can still make out the tent of something tantalizing pressed up in the front of Lance's pants as well, but he tries to be polite enough not to stare at it for too long.

"I get a lot of exercise," he says lightly, hand drifting down to circle around Lance's wrist, "At work and at home. I do a lot of heavy lifting."

Lance tips his head to the side, allowing it to rest against his shoulder. His free hand, the one not captured between Shiro's fingers, ghosts

downward and prods testingly at the hem of Shiro's pants just in front of where his legs encase Shiro's waist.

His hand slowly inches upward, and Shiro shivers at the feeling of his fingers ghosting against skin. He finds himself focused not on his body or Lance's or even on Lance's fingers tickling over his abdomen, but on his eyes, focused and dark and his low brows poised in concentration, and the deep stain of color muted on his cheeks in the shadows. He watches the shudder of Lance's throat when he swallows, the subtle movement of his Adam's apple and the slow rise and fall of his chest. Lance's fingers work over a particularly deep scar in his skin, and he jolts a little, snapping his gaze immediately to Shiro's face as though frantically searching for a reassurance to keep going, or the need for an apology, the end of this ill-fated venture into the more sexual side of their relationship, brought on maybe only because Lance was bold enough to touch him where someone once hurt him before. Shiro smiles, strokes his hand up Lance's arm to the elbow, over goose pimples and soft, peach-fuzz hair.

"It's okay," he says, "Keep going. Do whatever you want to me, Lance."

This might not have been the right thing to say, because Lance tenses immediately.

His eyes are saucer-round and his lip quivers and his fingers on Shiro's skin piston and press with dull nails prickling ticklishly enough that Shiro twitches under him. Lance swallows heavily and jerks his eyes away, and for a moment, Shiro wonders if he's said something wrong. If maybe that wasn't the right way to go about this, when in the moment, it had felt like exactly the message that he'd wanted to get across to Lance.

But moments later, Lance is pushing forward and downward with a palm shoved into Shiro's shoulder and another one bracing him on the cot. And he's kissing Shiro eagerly, his hips shifted and the stiffness tenting the front of his pants dragging over Shiro's, and the two of them, startled, jerking and breathing and Lance stuttering out a breath that sounds curiously like a moan.

Shiro suspects that Lance hasn't done this sort of thing very often before, if at all, but he keeps that idea to himself. He allows himself to kiss and be kissed by Lance and doesn't ask questions or laugh nervously or make a joke to break the tension when Lance clumsily and blindly snakes a hand between them and unzips, first, his own fly,

and then Shiro's.

Shiro finds that he still flushes in a notably virginal way when his bare skin is exposed to the dark air and Lance peers between the gap of their bodies and looks at him. He finds that he still feels just as embarrassed being grasped and pressed together with Lance's erection between Lance's nimble fingers and warm palm as he might have back in college, back before he really settled down, back when his humanity was still intact enough that he'd never known for certain if any person who he touched would outlive him or not. If a memory of his own unsubstantial naked body might be the last thing that any specific person might carry with them to their graves. If getting close to others would ever really be worth the humiliation of being known by them completely.

But Lance doesn't leave a lot of room for conversation or insecurity, and admittedly, he's clumsy when he moves his wrist and begins touching both of them at once. But it feels good—feels amazing to be touched by Lance and dominated by Lance and to find himself gazing up into those hooded and glassy blue eyes that watch him in a half-coherent daze of arousal through the fog of darkness in his quiet apartment. Save for their breathing and the persistent hum of the heater, the occasional skittering of animals in the walls and a rogue horn blaring somewhere far in the distance outside, it's silent. It's comfortable, too. Shiro finds himself swept up in a moment of feeling nothing but the blossoming of pleasure prickling hot under the surface of his skin. And Lance's soft and warm lips first pressed against his before deviating to his jawline and down to his throat. His fingers are timid and slow as they creep up Lance's arm and down his side before resting against one of his hips to steady him.

Lance offers him open-mouthed and breathless moans and they rock together gently and Shiro finds himself prematurely drawn closer to an end that he isn't sure if he should pursue more seriously or not. On one hand, it feels very, very good and Lance is so pretty, washed in ruby with dazed eyes and messy hair and swollen lips tasting every part of his skin that his mouth can reach. This is a picture that Shiro wouldn't mind looking at for a while, if not forever, but he also knows that Keith will be back soon, too. Keith will know even after they're done and re-dressed what happened only because Keith is generally very good at figuring out most things, but he isn't sure if he's willing to deal with the laughter and the teasing tonight, when his heart thrums with an overfill of emotions that he hasn't felt in many, many years. When he feels so tender and virginal and brand-new for the first time in three decades that suddenly feel more weighted and daunting

than they've ever felt before.

He feels a little raw tonight, feels dampness clinging to his lashes and the corners of his eyelids. Feels his heart squeezed then expanded too big in his rib cage, and his throat tight and closed and making it harder to breathe as Lance continues touching both of them. Shiro knows that it's a little pathetic to get so worked up over a simple handjob, but he also knows that most people who might judge him have never seen Lance looking as pretty as he looks right now. And they've definitely never found themselves underneath him and surrounded by him in all directions, and feeling oddly secure while tucked under such a wiry, bird-boned thing that might not even be able to protect himself, but…

Shiro wonders if maybe sometimes love can feel like this. Different than the endless devotion and dedication and the urge to live and die for Keith. Different than the solemn sadness that aches inside of him for his late mother and father. Lighter and more hopeful than the almosts that rattle distantly in memories from his human life that he can barely connect to anymore.

Shiro wonders if it's possible that he could be falling in love with Lance, too. Just as once upon a time, he'd fallen accidentally in love with Keith.

Maybe it doesn't matter right now.

Lance kisses him again, he cums quietly and with a small shudder and a breathless groan. Lance arches in and trembles desperately, buries his face in the crook of Shiro's neck and breathes hard for a few moments as both of them regain their bearings.

Shiro wants to tell Lance that everything is going to be okay from now on. He wants to tell him that he's changed things between Shiro and Keith since he stumbled in on them accidentally—that things are better now *because* he's here. That they're happier now than they might have ever been in the past.

He wants to tell Lance that there are sunny and warm days ahead of them, that they'll always have each other, that he'd go anywhere in the world if it would make Lance happier than he feels right now, stuck here.

But the words stall in his throat, and his opportunity is stolen from him anyway.

From a spot in the dark corner of the room, there's a click of the window closing and a soft voice deadpan in the thick black.

"Gross," it says flatly, "That's our bed, you know."

Chapter End Notes

> Starting next week, I'm going to begin posting new chapters weekly! So the final chapter will be posted on June 14th. Thank you so much to everyone for your patience!

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Veronica runs a hand through her hair, pausing for a moment to consider just how long it's been since she washed it, but deciding, inevitably, that right now, standing in the overpacked aisle of a busy grocery store probably isn't the most pertinent of times to consider such a thing. She distracts herself instead with looking over the glossy, plastic-wrapped faces of a dozen different varieties of the same heart-shaped chocolate boxes. Different brand names stare back at her with their varied golden logos. They'll all taste like plastic before the month is through, she knows from experience. The flowers will wilt and die away. Dr. Smythe will presumably buy the entire office a selection of these exact sorts of things for their staff party, and while budget chocolate perhaps isn't a delicacy to the common man, she can't help but look forward to sneaking a treat for herself far away from the prying eyes of her children.

She feels no regret or animosity when she thinks of them, feels no dread as she resigns herself to spending a few dollars that they really don't have to spare on Valentine's Day cards for the entirety of her daughter and sons' classes. Luckily, these days, most of the cards that her kids would even be interested in come in 30-packs for less than a dollar each. Her daughter is getting old enough that in a year or so, they won't have to do this sort of thing at all anymore. There's a voice at the back of her mind telling her to cherish these moments of their childhood while she still can, mingled with a looming sense of foreboding that she isn't sure is her motherly instincts dreading the day that they get old enough to wander from the nest, or perhaps something less related to them at all, and more relevant to their uncle, who didn't join her for this venture as he so eagerly has in the past.

She can't hold that against him. He had to work. She knows that he'd be more hands-on these days if he weren't so strapped for time. Being so young and already saddled with domesticity isn't easy, and she knows that Lance was never much of a rebel even when he was a kid. But it's hard to do these things without him when they've spent so much time together, all these years. It's hard to feel the absence of his presence in her life when she knows better than anyone that keeping him caged here isn't what he wants or needs and definitely isn't what he deserves after everything that he's gone through.

Instead of thinking about it and making herself only feel worse, she decides to focus on the incoming Valentine's Day parties. She tells the kids to pick whichever cards they want for their classes, tells them to be mindful of other shoppers and precariously stocked shelves. She'll grab some milk and bread after they decide. Silvio already settled on a set based on some robot cartoon that he's been particularly invested in lately. He's an aisle over, helping El ías read through the limited selection of catchphrases written on a different box, featuring a Saturday-morning cartoon mascot character that he watches over his breakfast cereal. Silvio is sounding the words out for him slowly, but allowing him to finish them on his own. She listens to the sputter of his uncertainty and Silvio's soft voice and she smiles, gently, as she runs her fingers over the price tags on the shelves.

Silvio is a good older brother. She trusts him to help his younger brother settle on something good. And she knows that they're getting to the age where she doesn't completely understand their interests anymore, that they're more likely to rely on each other to choose the coolest and sleekest things that might impress their classmates than they are to ask for mom's opinion. She listens to their hushed murmurs through the slots in the shelves. She grabs one of the crinkly-wrapped chocolate boxes and inspects the ingredients and calorie count on the back of it.

She wonders if she should buy one of these too. They agreed not to do anything fancy for Valentine's day this year, sure, but…

She places it back on the shelf, shaking her head. Her cheeks feel warm now, and she's thankful that Lance opted out of joining them. She still hasn't said anything to him about it, but she has a feeling that he knows. Has a feeling that it's yet another thing added to the giant pile of unhad conversations between them that eventually they'll either tackle one by one or allow to fester until they rot away completely.

Nadia is an aisle over, crouched in front of a shelf diagonally from where Veronica and the cart are situated and just close enough that Veronica can see her if she leans far enough back. She's inspecting the slightly more "grown-up" cards, the sorts adorned with loopy hearts and bubble letters without the smiling, goofy faces of any cartoon characters saying the phrases still written on the fronts. She's eight this year and she wants everyone to know that she's practically an adult. And there's a boy in her class that she has a crush on, who might be more wooed by a plain and professional pre-packaged Valentine than he'd be by something faced with Dora the Explorer or

Barbie, or whatever character is popular with the kids in Nadia's class this year. Lance could probably tell her without hesitation. He's always been better at keeping up with the rise and fall of the kids' fleeting interests than she has been.

But Lance, right now, is gone. He'd apologetically turned down her offer to come along before reminding her that he had to work. She forgets often and feels guilty, too. She isn't sure how he keeps on track of such a chaotic schedule and still has time to spend with that boyfriend of his. But she knows that they find time, that she's seen Lance brighter and lighter lately than she has, really, ever. They weren't close before their parents died. She knows that back then, he was a kid brother who she left behind for bigger and better things, in the hands of loving parents who she'd known with certainty would raise him right. But coming back… getting to know him all over again, maybe even for the first time, she realizes only now, in the glare of the overbearing grocery store lights, in the scratch of the dusty music churning through the speakers and the thick wall of chatter all around her, that she's never known a version of Lance who's been this happy.

She owes that to Ryou, she knows. Even though, on some level, there's a motherly side of her that mourns a checkered-smile version of her little brother who still thought that his big sis was the coolest person in the world.

But anymore, it's hard to sync up plans on their busy schedules. She'll go days sometimes without seeing more than a glimpse of him. She'd told him to invite Ryou over for dinner again when he finds that the three of them have another day off. It's a distant and enigmatic plan that might not ever come to fruition, but it's a nice gesture anyway. Ryou seemed to enjoy her cooking well enough, despite how she's never managed to master it, and if the fleeting conversations that she's had with Lance on the subject are any indication, Ryou doesn't often have the opportunity to enjoy homemade things. Or the company of a family. Or really anything particularly warm or domestic at all.

Since the death of that awful Officer Sendak, things have been relatively peaceful. Lance has been as tight-lipped as ever, only offering her the smallest hints of information and staying uncharacteristically private about the goings on of his personal life. She knows that he's been considering her gentle promptings to move away. She knows that she hasn't been exactly secretive or coy when she's left out the pamphlets mailed to him from various colleges, hoping that maybe he'll apply. His credits from his online classes

should roll over, but she isn't even sure if he signed up for this semester. She doesn't know what he's planning, and she hates to admit that it bothers her, hates to confront the idea that for the first time in her life, Lance has grown so distant that she doesn't even understand his life anymore.

She'd like to think that he's become more receptive to the idea that she can survive here without him just fine, but she can't be sure. She can't read him anymore, and he's still going to work at both jobs, still stalling before pursuing more online schooling.

Still behaving as though he's planning to stay here forever, no matter how desperately she knows that he wants to go somewhere warmer and brighter than this.

She knows that they've been through a lot together and that Lance can be kind of protective. It's a good trait of his, this loyalty. It's nice to know that he'll always have her back, no matter how inconvenient or miserable that might make him as a result. But the introduction of a man like Ryou Yamazaki into their lives can't be anything but a good sign. He's brought out characteristics in Lance that she thought might have been buried years ago, rekindled a passion for life inside of him that seemed as though long ago it might have been extinguished. Maybe Ryou can convince him to go to a real college somewhere far away from here. Maybe Ryou can show him that toiling away in misery isn't the only way that a person has to live.

Ryou, hailing from sunny Florida, must understand that there are far more beautiful places than this in the world and that moving from home to somewhere better isn't some great betrayal to the people and places that raised him. He might be able to show Lance that he's owed more from life than working hard until he dies and never experiencing any of the dreams that he still pretends he doesn't have each time that Veronica herself tries to coax him.

Maybe Ryou can get through to him, as she knows that she's failed again and again. Maybe now, since big sis is so clearly not the brightest star in the sky anymore, like Silvio and El ías, he'll honor the opinion of someone who understands him better.

She sighs softly, running her fingers over the glossy packaging of the chocolate boxes in their rows. She roves her eyes over their brands and various slogans without really comprehending them. She listens to the rise and fall of the scratchy music overhead and the chatter of patrons rushing around the store in search of each item on their

grocery lists, and her children talking just an aisle over, before she decides that they've had long enough to choose between the dozen or so various types of Valentines and it's time to grab a few groceries too and go home. It's Friday, so uncle Lance should be home a little bit sooner than usual. If they want to see him in the morning before he goes to work at the convenience store in the afternoon, they need to get washed up and go to bed on time.

She collects Silvio and El ías and sends both of them a few short steps away to grab the milk and bread. They place their chosen Valentines in the cart and scurry off excitedly to complete this very important task. She skirts around the shelf to grab Nadia as well, but when she moves into the open aisle, when she gazes through the rows of shelves where she last left her, suddenly, she's nowhere to be found.

Veronica used to experience this sort of panic often when Lance was a kid and she was less practiced as a mother. He used to run off and hide very often as a troubled child who never quite learned how to grapple with the deaths of his parents and the new introduction of a sister into his life, who he'd never known more than a shallow shadow and a familial title, until she moved back to town.

She was too old for the two of them to have ever had anything in common. Their older siblings were out of the house within a year of all of them moving to Colorado. Each of them swiftly swept away to college and securing their own visas to stay. Veronica herself had been very fortunate when Dr. Smythe, at that time just a distant friend of her parents' that she'd met no more than twice before she'd moved, had offered her a job until she secured citizenship for herself and Lance. And she'd struggled greatly, for a long time, to make ends meet while jumping through the required hoops to get both of them to that more secure place.

So Lance, without many memories of home or siblings or a nebulous past that he's still expected to be connected to, had been riddled with anxiety and confusion and anger that a kid his age shouldn't have been expected to shoulder alone. And he'd vanished a lot to go hide out and lick whatever proverbial wounds he'd developed when a kid at school said something mean to him or they watched a movie about parents and their children. And Veronica spent many years learning not to panic when he simply wasn't where she expected for him to be, but…

Nadia has never been like that.

She takes a deep breath, willing herself not to panic. She shoves her cart perhaps a little harder than she needs to through the various aisles and takes a moment to jerk her gaze back toward the boys, hoping, maybe, that she'd met up with them to show off her new cards.

But they're hauling a gallon of milk towards her, just the two of them, without their sister. El ías lifts the bread proudly over his head. She snatches it from him quickly and apologizes in a breathless way, setting it down shakily in the cart and swallowing deeply before patting him on the back. She then grasps him under the arms and sets him in the child's seat near the handles. She takes the milk from Silvio more gently and sets it with the other things before instructing for him to follow close behind her.

"We have to find your sister," she says, voice edged with stress, "Have you seen her?"

Silvio shakes his head, wide and slow from side to side. She feels guilty for tugging him along so roughly but the more that time passes, the more terrified she feels. She knows that Officer Sendak was attacked by an animal. She knows that Sal, the grumpy old barkeeper who disappeared months ago, probably met the same fate. She knows that neither man was a child or an innocent little girl, and she has no reason to believe that anyone in this small town would be bold enough to snatch her kid from an aisle when she was so close by. But she feels terror strike through her and feels helpless and useless and so stupid for trusting her children to wander about in such a cramped but heavily occupied space. She thinks about all of those *Dateline* episodes that she's watched in the past, how mothers always say that they never thought that it could be them, not in their towns with their neighbors. Not in a community where everyone knows everyone by name. She'd been lulled into the same false sense of security. She's just as terrible and negligent as all of the mothers that she used to judge privately when she watched their interviews on TV.

She's already panicking, thinking about how she'll tell Lance, or if she should tell Lance—if she should call his work and beg him to leave early to help her search. If she should alert one of the employees passing by her and offering her the briefest of worried glances. Her breath feels heavy and sour in her throat and her chest feels pinched as though it's swollen and closed in on itself. And she could throw up now, if she allowed herself a moment to relax. If she wasn't so intent on rushing through the aisles and offering half-articulated apologies to poor Silvio when he struggles to keep up and complains at her.

She's all the way across the store, in the greeting card section that's devoid of anyone for a few barren aisles. She frantically wheels her noisy cart with its loose, squeaky wheel around a bobbing display of half-filled balloons. And she spots Nadia, finally, peeling open a sparkly greeting card and chatting quietly with an adult, just at the other end.

The voice that she almost calls out with is croaky and lodged deep in her throat. She recognizes the face that smiles down at Nadia and the sharp, dark eyes, the frown-lines embedded deep into the wrinkled skin around the woman's thin lips. She knows this person. She's seen her around. She's never spoken to her but felt her eyes watching, at times, in a way that's so familiar these days that Veronica barely registers it at all anymore. She's the one who investigated that cougar attack. The one who visited the doctor's office with the corpse.

A real loony , is what he'd called her. An absolute stick-in-the-mud, but a straight-shooter. Dr. Smythe had been uncomfortable around her. He'd said that something about her felt "off".

Detective… Detective *Something* . Not loud and boisterous and violent like Officer Sendak. Not stern but respectful like Detective Iverson.

The name is on the tip of her tongue. The woman's hand is on her child's back.

Veronica shoves forward, stalls, and tells the boys to wait behind with the cart. When she steps further into the aisle, the woman's eyes rise to meet hers and her half-smile abruptly drops. Nadia swivels around. She grins widely and presents the card in her hands.

"Can I get this one, mama? Look how pretty it is!"

The woman's hand moves with Nadia, stays stuck on her like a thorn embedded in the fabric. Her dark veins bulge through paper skin. Her blunted nails catch in the threadbare edges of Nadia's old coat.

Veronica reaches out, resting her palm in the fluff of Nadia's coat and pulling her away, out of the woman's grasp, behind her own back. Shoving her with a forced gentleness towards the cart. Riddled with adrenaline that feels like ice water plunging through her veins, blurring her thoughts, catching her breath, stalling every recollection that isn't related to protecting her children from whatever threat her more animalistic instincts have picked up on here.

She says something that might be, "Sure, baby, just wait over there"

but she's too swept up in a sudden primal urge akin to nothing that she's ever felt before. Watching this old woman like a bird protecting her eggs from a mongoose, she doesn't know why any of this feels so sinister. She would be thanking anyone else for taking care of her kid. She would be apologizing sheepishly for losing sight of her and struggling to reassure them in few words that she's usually a good mom. She wouldn't feel as though something was amiss under normal circumstances, and she knows that there's no good reason why she should be feeling this way right now.

But something is wrong. She doesn't like the sharpness of this woman's eyes. She doesn't like one part of this, not one bit. She wants to burn Nadia's coat where that woman touched it, wants to reach forward and claw at her like some kind of feral creature for even coming this close to her kin. And if that woman even so much as looks in Nadia's direction again, Veronica is afraid of what she might do in response.

Nadia herself has dutifully joined her brothers, hanging with small hands from the edge of the cart. Veronica can see all three of them in her peripherals watching her now. She swallows shallowly, shoving her shaking hands in her pockets and taking a careful step back. The woman in front of her rises to her feet with a hand steadied against the card shelf. She isn't much taller than Veronica herself is, and she's thin enough that Veronica isn't even sure if she'd be much of a struggle to escape from if things did, in fact, go south. But Veronica can see the outline of her gun propped at her hip, and she reminds herself, once again, that she was the detective investigating both disappearances, that Dr. Smythe isn't often taken so aback by other people that he'd admit to feeling threatened by them, but… something about this woman had alarmed him. She'd given him a bad vibe. Enough so, Veronica remembers with a pounding of her pulse in her ears, that he'd warned her to keep her distance.

Something, now, just isn't quite right.

She needs to get out of here, but her legs just won't move, no matter how helplessly she begs them to.

"I'm… sorry about my daughter," Veronica tells her then, inching backward clumsily as though she might be able to escape this conversation in the same way that, as a kid, she might have thought that someone could evade being spotted by a T-Rex: no sudden movements. Stay quiet. Be on your guard. Don't do anything stupid. "Thank you for keeping her company until I got here. She's been very

adamant about finding the right cards for her class's Valentine's Day party."

The expression that glosses over the woman's face isn't so much a smile as it might be a smirk, and her eyes don't seek out Nadia as Veronica regrettably expects for them to. Instead, she levels Veronica herself with a pressing look, honed in on her like a predator might, like the dinosaurs from all of Veronica's childhood nightmares. She smoothes out her coat and takes a moment to pull the front of it out, to right its position, to flash the holster where her gun still rests at her hip.

"It's quite alright," she says, monotone and devoid of any laughter or lightheartedness or any real indication that things are, as she claims, actually okay, "You should keep a closer eye on your children, however. Especially considering what kind of people your brother consorts with."

Veronica's brows tighten and she clenches her jaw. She can't keep the surprise out of her face in time. The Detective catches it, revels in the shock that she's imposed on her, laughs, short and clipped, and runs a thumb under the long strap of her purse to reposition it on her shoulder.

"You never did put young Lance in therapy after your parents died, did you?" She clicks her tongue. "That was a questionable move, considering how troubled he seemed to be. The whole town suspected that he'd do something egregious someday, but this…? You do know, right, what your younger brother has been up to, correct? You know what sorts of unfavorable things he's gotten himself wrapped up in these days?"

Veronica backs further away. Her heel knocks against a display, wobbling it precariously to her side but not quite tumbling over. Behind her, Nadia asks if she's okay. She can't find the voice to tell her that everything is fine. She can't breathe, really, or think straight enough beyond each of her suspicions about Lance and her wildest, seemingly unwarranted fears sprung up from this woman's lips.

She manages a shaky, "I-I don't know what you're talking about."

And the detective stalks forward, shoves a finger hard into the center of her chest, and leans in so closely that Veronica can see the reflection of herself bounded back darker in those sharp, unforgiving eyes.

“Ryou Yamazaki is a killer,” she says, punctuated with another sharp jab of her finger, with the lowering of her brows, with the twitch of those deep frown lines around her thin lips, “And you’ve allowed your little brother to play right into his hand. Does it not matter to you because they’ve only hurt people who you didn’t know? Because you didn’t have to go to Officer Sendak’s closed casket funeral, it doesn’t affect you? Will you only open your eyes when your imbecile brother allows him to hurt one of your children? *When* will you open your eyes to this, Veronica McClain? When will you admit that your darling little brother isn’t that scared child anymore? He doesn’t care about you or your kids. He isn’t living to honor your parents anymore. He hurts people. He does whatever that monster asks of him. And he’s not going to stop until he’s hurt you, and your children, and—”

The sound of the slap is the first thing that knocks Veronica out of her dizzied thoughts. The flurry of emotion churning like the jump-start of blood rushing through her veins thins and parts in thick waves to reveal the detective, wide-eyed and shoved back by the force of a hand making unexpected, violent contact with her now reddened face. And Veronica herself, hand still extended up in the air, shaking, as she struggles to accept the fact that she just assaulted someone in public, in front of her own kids.

She moves further away. Her back makes contact with the handle of her cart and poor, fretful El ías’s shaking legs hanging through the slots. She tries to apologize and to offer some frantic semblance of an explanation. She tries to make things right and to find the correct thing to say that might mend things where suddenly she’s jettisoned them in the worst possible direction. She’s clamoring and fretful as she knocks that wobbly display to the floor, as her feet knock into the shelves and her hands grope and tug cards from their slots in her haste to drag herself away from this.

She needs to fix things. She needs to say something to clear the air now.

She just assaulted a police officer.

She needs to make this right.

But what leaves her mouth is a tearful and rage-filled cry of hard consonants that feel like lit matches as they spark off of her tongue. Her teeth bared and her hands stammering as they grasp the bars of her cart, as she half-turns away and begins shoving out of the aisle with little regard for the things that she mows down in her path.

“Stay the fuck away from my family.”

The detective is still watching her like a deer caught in headlights just before she turns away completely and rushes away. Veronica feels as though she’s turning her back on a mountain lion, as though she’s making a huge mistake that she might pay for greatly later. The woman, for all she knows, continues to stand there, statuesque, for hours and hours to come. Unmoving and shell shocked, totally unprepared to be assaulted when she must have thought that she’d had Veronica backed helplessly into a corner.

Veronica remembers watching nature documentaries about mother bears protecting their young. For a moment, through the guilt and the fear, part of her feels powerful, untouchable. Part of her feels like the apex predator that those mellow-voiced narrators speak over in documentaries about motherhood in nature.

But emotion continues to roil inside of her, enough so, that she’s a phantom of a person even as she loads her groceries onto the belt at checkout. The kids help, they coddle her and stay decidedly and carefully quiet. Nadia takes the bags from the carousel and loads them back into the cart. Veronica struggles with her pin in the machine two times before she gets it right on the third.

The air outside is frigid and the kids tuck themselves further into their winter coats as they walk back to the car. They struggle with the bags and hoist them into the trunk. Silvio walks with her to the cart rack as she returns it. Nadia buckles El ías into his car seat.

The four of them sit quietly for a long time in the car and Veronica doesn’t turn the key in the ignition. The kids don’t ask her what in the world just unfolded back inside of the store. They don’t ask why she isn’t driving them home just yet.

Veronica rests her head against the steering wheel, taking a long, deep breath.

She feels like an idiot. She feels like the weakest, worst mother in the entire world.

Nadia’s little hand rests against her shoulder as she starts crying.

They don’t talk about it.

When they get home, the kids clean up and go to bed without another word.

Lance kicks through the snow, sniffling unhappily as he trudges towards his apartment and yearns for the warmth and comfort that he'll surely find in his bed. It's nearly midnight at this point and his shift at the convenience store dragged on so much longer than it should have. The floors had been almost irredeemably filthy when he'd wandered in innocently, naively thinking that tonight would be simple and easy as the days have been over the last few months. But the piling snow and the salt and slush-brown mud accumulating in the parking lot had been trudged in and left to melt and dry and grow over as a sticky scab on the linoleum that Hunk had already been struggling with when he'd clocked in. The two of them aided with cleaning supplies and a whole lot of elbow grease hadn't made even the slightest dent in the mass of it. And long after, when Hunk had already run an hour over the end of his shift, Lance had regretfully sent him home and decided to spend the rest of his shift struggling to clean it. He'd gotten it eventually, but his entire body aches. A headache has splintered between his eyes and at the base of his skull and all that he wants now is to sleep.

He hadn't even had Keith's company to make everything better tonight, hadn't gotten an unexpected phone call from Shiro. Hadn't been afforded any level of comfort or release as he'd angrily scrubbed and re-scrubbed the tiles until the filth had finally lifted from them an entire two hours after he should have clocked out.

The windows had been speckled with water stains. Everything had seemed as though it existed just under a fine yet semi-permanent layer of dirt.

He aches between his shoulders and down his spine, the feeling of tenseness settled in a bundle of tight nerves just at the cleft of his ass, that he can't even stretch out no matter which ridiculous directions he contorts himself into. He wonders if someone else could work the soreness out of his skin if he were bold enough to request that. But thinking then about Shiro or Keith, or perhaps even both of them together, laying their cold hands over his body might not make him feel any warmer, but it definitely alleviates some of the exhausted annoyance that he's feeling and replaces it, instead, with a fuzzy, half-awake kind of arousal that only makes him want to get back to his room quicker.

But it dissipates just as quickly as it bubbles up. He's too hungry and far too tired and sore to even consider thinking about those things right now.

He wonders if it would be too noisy or if the smell would wake up Veronica or the kids if he were to make a trip to the kitchen after undressing and showering to warm up a nice mug of hot chocolate. He wonders if he'll even be awake enough by the time that all is said and done to even pull that off. With how he's feeling now, he wouldn't be surprised if he dozed off in the shower again, put to sleep under the spray of steamy water and eased into such a tranquil state that maybe only the heat ebbing out and replacing instead with the remaining cold will be the only thing that manages to wake him up.

Or, maybe like only once or twice before, even that won't manage to wake him, and Veronica or one of the kids will find him passed out under a frozen spray hours later when one of them needs to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night or early morning. He'd nearly given Veronica a heart attack the first time that he'd done it, but for the life of him, he can't remember actually lying down on the floor of the tub and allowing himself to drift off. She'd carted him off to Dr. Smyth's office first thing in the morning to check for a concussion, but when nothing had become of it, the doctor's only suggestion had been to try to get more sleep.

He laughs again, thinking about the likelihood of that.

But maybe he can spare a few minutes once he gets home to pour himself a hot drink and wind down before he needs to sleep, and inevitably resets to a whole new day of the same busy schedule and a lack of rest that's quickly pushing him to an early grave.

Fantasizing about warm drinks and soft blankets is more than enough to propel him through the courtyard and up the stairs to his door. Shiro isn't tucked away in his usual spot, even when Lance cranes his neck to make completely sure of it, but he's not surprised when he sees only an empty spot against the bricks that Shiro's wide body so often occupies. It's been a spotty few weeks since Lance spent the night in their apartment, and while sleeping with Keith wedged between them had been the godsend that he hadn't even known was missing in his life until he'd experienced it, their communication has been infrequent at best since.

Not for a lack of trying, really. It's just been dryer in terms of finding blood, harder to rove the streets for roadkill under Sanda's

unrelenting, watchful eye. Keith's done okay as far as Lance is aware —splurged a few times on resting deer and small birds and squirrels. Fed from Shiro fleetingly, but maybe not enough to put both Shiro and Lance's minds at ease. And for the first time, Lance has watched his health slowly deteriorate over the weeks, jarred upon meeting up with him after a blip of empty days apart to find just how much his skin can continue to dry out, how brassy his hair is capable of becoming, how thin and skeletal a creature can really be until its knees buckle beneath it and even walking seems to be a substantial chore.

Keith, one of the last times that Lance had seen him, had wobbled out of the bathroom to meet him and braced his weight against the doorframe with near-skeletal hands. His dark eyes had been dull with pupils blurry and blown out. His cracked lips had pulled tight around teeth that suddenly looked too big for his mouth.

He'd squared Lance with an unfocused look, opened his lips to say words that sounded more like a grate of stone struck against sand. Everything felt heavy after that, as though a weighted blanket had been dropped over Lance's shoulders. He'd felt an empty gnawing at the insides of his chest like something feral and desperate was trying to claw its way out.

Keith is dying again, but he'll never die completely.

He'll just continue to suffer and suffer until…

Lance isn't even sure.

Shiro had told him just the other day that even pilfering blood bags from his job has become nearly impossible. The hospital has noticed over the passing months that their stock is lighter than it should be, and people just aren't donating as much as they used to. He needs to log his I.D. number into a sign-in sheet near the door if he even wants to enter the storage room now, and that's too dangerous, too risky to be caught if the hospital were to report him to the police, which, reasonably, they both know, they could.

But Keith, reliably, has continued to refuse to feed from Lance. He doesn't explain it in so many words, but maybe… maybe he thinks that he won't be able to control himself. Maybe he's afraid that he'll hurt Lance as he hurt Shiro not long ago, but that Lance won't have Shiro's immortality to rely on. Lance won't be able to bounce back relatively quickly from the physical trauma of it, and that he might

not even recover at all.

They're valid concerns, but that doesn't make the situation any less frustrating. It would be too easy to accept Lance's assistance and get well enough to hunt on his own again. It would be far too simple, and Lance knows that none of this was ever designed to be simple.

He sighs, squaring his shoulders and tightening his grip on the bag slung over his shoulders before grasping at the guardrail of the stairs and climbing carefully up. It's slick with ice tonight, and he really doesn't want to add a *real* concussion to his growing list of stressors right now. He makes it to the top without incident, but fumbles a little further down, just feet from his front door, on a patch of slick obscured in the blackness that he can't stop himself from cursing at Keith silently for. It's impossible to see anything anymore. It's impossible to take care of himself when he can't even see his hand in front of his face.

He's rambling internally about this as he grapples for his keys in his pocket, as he raises them in a trembling hand and shivers in the cold dark, feeling pointedly alone out here in the silence. Knowing painfully well that Keith can't witness him now, no matter how desperately he'd love to give him a piece of his mind.

But Keith, right now, is tucked away in a cot that Shiro's made of blankets and pillows in the bathtub. He hasn't risen from that spot for three days straight, and while Lance has visited him every time that he's been given the opportunity to do so, their interactions have been fleeting, each more troubling than the last. Lance watches guiltily as Keith sleeps, Keith awakens for brief glimpses of time to argue as Lance shoves a wrist in front of his lips and demands that he finally swallow his pride and eat.

Keith is stubborn, too, which is yet another thing that Lance has learned about him over time. He won't do anything if he's made his mind up. His resolve remains unrelenting no matter how terribly his health fades away.

He shakes his head, shoving open the door and stepping inside. He closes it behind him as he eases in, latching the lock and pocketing his keys as he knocks the snow from the bottom of his boots onto the welcome mat. He drops his bag next to him on the floor, telling himself that he'll remember to grab it tomorrow. He unties his boots and sets them away too, then slides his coat from his shoulders and hangs it blindly from the hook on the back of the closet door.

There's light dimly spilling from the living room just around the corner of the hall. It's a short walk from the entryway to there, and he wonders if Veronica left it on so he'd be able to see tonight, for some reason, as she often forgets, or if maybe it was a mistake. If she might have fallen asleep reading or watching TV and the kids had already been put to bed, and if he should wake her before he takes his shower so she isn't sore when she gets up tomorrow.

Veronica has always been fairly grouchy upon being woken up. He wonders if dealing with her dreary wrath is really worth doing that sort of favor for her.

But he has to pass through there anyway to get to the bathroom and his bedroom. And he does, slowly, lumbering in sore exhaustion and running a rubbery hand through his hair as he thinks about how good a mug of hot chocolate could really be right now.

And when he reaches the living room, he's surprised to see Veronica sitting up, facing him, on the couch. She isn't sleeping and she's looking right at him. There's a notebook in her hands that he recognizes as the one that he's left sitting on his nightstand over the last couple of months, ever since Shiro stayed the night and Keith knocked on the window and Lance wrote him those notes inside of it.

He swallows thickly, freezing in place just at the threshold of the entryway hall into the living room. Veronica doesn't smile or greet him and her expression remains unchanged. In the soft yellow light of the lamp on the end table beside her, Lance catches the wetness in her eyes behind her glasses, wonders if he's just imagining the red rims around them or the puffiness of her cheeks, the quiver of her lip. The soft pallidness and the slope in her shoulders that allude to just the kind of unhappy conversation that he isn't awake enough to deal with tonight.

He feels suddenly very bad about this entire situation. He wonders if it would have been better if he'd just resigned himself to another hot chocolate-less night and gone to visit Keith and Shiro instead.

Or if seeing Keith so emaciated would actually be more taxing emotionally than realizing that Veronica is still crying, even as she sits, stony and statuesque, and watches him intently from across the living room.

"Veronica it's—it's almost midnight. Why are you up?"

His words are irrelevant but safe. He decides in a split second of self-

preservation that instead of confronting everything that he's already collected about this conversation, he's going to play dumb. Just add this to the growing pile of things that they still have yet to confront and tackle together. Just continue to pretend that everything is normal and everything is okay, until so much time and silence accumulates between their lies and secrets that they're buried underneath them forever.

Veronica's fingers worry against the frayed edges of the notebook. She allows her gaze to dip down to it, lifting the front cover as though she might slip through his old notes and doodles, as though she might read through each of its contents and happen upon the scribbled messages for Keith on accident.

"Lance," she says, firmer than he would have expected, after seeing her so obviously broken up over this, "What the Hell is going on?"

He starts to respond, but then his words halt in his throat, freeze in his thoughts, and he realizes abruptly that he really doesn't even know where to begin with any of it. He could tell Veronica that everything is fine, sure, but he doesn't know if that would make anything better. He doesn't know if it would really make things easier when he inevitably abandons her and the kids or if perhaps he might just leave so many questions unanswered that Veronica would never be able to live happily without him, reassured that he really will be okay.

But he doesn't know how to explain to her that he'll leave soon, first and foremost. He doesn't know how to confess that he's been committed to the idea for months at this point, leading back to that first night that he talked to Keith and Shiro about their situation and so woefully unprepared and so idiotically naive to trust two virtual strangers with his future when honestly, he'd barely known more about them than just their names.

He's gotten to know them better over time, sure, but… he knows that it sounds bad. It would make him seem like an idiot if he admitted it. He was tempted by the prospect of getting out of this place, by spending time with two interesting and gorgeous and dangerous people, and had either of them turned out to be anything but what he'd dreamed that they could be, then things could have gone sour very quickly. Veronica would have had a very logical reason to be afraid for him.

He might be begging for her help instead of stumbling through everything that he should be telling her now. He might be clawing in

an endless ocean for air, and Veronica's hand would be the only thing that could save him.

But that isn't his predicament anymore, never has been and might never be the case. He's just been a very bad brother, kept secrets from her and forced her to assume the worst.

He knows that he owes her an apology and an explanation, but he just doesn't know how to say it.

He clears his throat, stepping further into the room and ignoring the way that she sits up straighter as though she might jump up from her seat and run from the room in fear of him. He doesn't like feeling as though he's put her in this position—this place of uncertainty and discomfort on the threshold of betrayal, but he doesn't understand what he could have done to make her feel that way, either. He doesn't know what suddenly could have tipped her off sans the messages that he'd so stupidly scrawled in that notebook months ago, and what could have inspired her in the first place to flip through it after all this time has passed and she's left it untouched.

It's not like she's had any reason to believe that it's filled with more than sloppy notes and doodles. It's not like he's moved it or fiddled with it since he set it on the nightstand all that time ago.

But he collects his thoughts and contemplates what Shiro might say in a situation like this. He'd have empathy and tact that Lance knows that he lacks almost entirely. He'd try to think of how Veronica might feel in this situation and attempt, instead of defending himself, to alleviate her stress.

He rubs a hand over his face.

"I'm sorry," he says to her then, "I know I haven't… been very honest with you for a while now."

Veronica purses her lips. Her fingers press into the edges of the notebook, but she still doesn't flip open the cover of it. He wonders if she brought it out here to present to him as evidence, or if it's more of a comfort thing. If maybe she brought it with her just so he couldn't convince her that she's being crazy. Like an anchor fastening her to the reality that something strange is going on here, and no amount of coaxing on his part could make her forget it, if she allows her fingers to keep touching it. He shakes off that train of thought. He crosses his arms over his chest and hangs his head.

He's so tired. He wishes that she could have waited to talk about this until the morning, but he knows deep down that there would never be a perfect time. No matter when she chose to bring it up, he'd still keep hoping to put it off until later. He might have waited forever, until it was too late, if she hadn't decided to confront him tonight.

"Are you in danger?"

Veronica's voice is soft and it wavers with an uncertainty that pinches in his heart. She's still watching him with an unflinching attentiveness, and he feels guilty. He feels terrible that he's done this to her, that he's put her in a position where, despite the lies and the secrets and the sneaking around, she still worries about his safety first.

"Not really," he says then, breathing long and hard and willing himself to wake up enough to be truly present for this conversation, "Veronica, I—I really wanted to tell you, I… I did, but… It's just so bizarre, I didn't think you'd believe me. I-I mean, I barely believe it still and I'm right in the middle of—"

"Is Ryou hurting people? Did he threaten you?"

And Lance realizes suddenly that something is amiss here. He knows that Veronica would have no real reason to suspect Shiro. He knows that, without some kind of outside inspiration, she'd never be the kind of person to pin the blame on someone else when Lance was the one acting strangely. His mouth feels dry and his throat feels closed up around all of the words that he wants to say, and before he can even articulate his thoughts neatly in his head, Veronica pushes on.

"That lady detective—Sandra or something? Did she have a good reason to stop me and the kids at the store today? Those disappearances and Officer Sendak and those dead animals, the broken lights… are you involved in that? Is she after you, Lance? Is… is this what you're in the middle of?"

Lance watches her for a moment with wide eyes, feeling suddenly as though she's doused him with ice water and successfully chased every ounce of exhaustion from his bones. He stands up straighter and tucks his arms tighter around himself. He tries to abate the fear and the anxiety and the regret boiling inside of him. He tries to pretend that it isn't there at all.

He flicks his gaze away into the dark corners of the room, tries to imagine if he'd feel more confident now if he could feel those hundreds of invisible eyes watching him and if those quiet whispers

were wrapping around him like the security blanket that they've so recently become. If he'd feel more confident now if Shiro's big, warm hand was settled on his shoulder, urging him along.

He pushes out a long breath. He forces his eyes to meet Veronica's again.

He has to be strong enough to do some things on his own. He can't keep running to them each time that something scares him or any time that things get just a little too hard.

"I… I can't tell you everything. I'm sorry, I just—it's not safe. But… Ryou didn't hurt anyone. I haven't hurt anyone, but… It's more complicated than that. And I'm sorry that Sanda went after you, I didn't—I didn't think it would go this far. The thing that killed Sendak and did all of that stuff, it really wasn't human. And you're… just gonna have to believe me. I don't think you'd wanna know even… even if I could tell you."

"I do believe you."

There's a long silence strung out between them after that. Veronica drums her fingers against the surface of the notebook.

"You're going to leave with him, aren't you? Am I ever going to see you again?"

Lance's lips smooth out in a flat line. He feels dampness accumulating at the corners of his eyes, but his arms, wrapped tight still around him, don't move upward to wipe the tears away. He shakes his head back and forth. His voice is snagged just at the base of his throat.

"Lance… I can't put the kids in danger like that. I can't… let them hear people accusing their uncle of being a killer and I—I can't let them see me like that again. I don't know what the Hell is going on with you, but… If you're putting this family in danger, maybe… maybe it would be best if you left."

Lance's brows bow together. He bites his lip and wills down the roll of hot tears over his cheeks. Veronica, across from him, wipes at her eyes under her glasses, rubs the corner of her sleeve pulled up over her knuckles over her puffy skin. The breath that she drags out is weighted and shaken and in a brief close of silence between them, Lance wonders if he's being selfish. He wonders if his own happiness is even worth putting his sister and her kids through this kind of agony.

If anyone could say that he's the hero in this story and not the antagonist, or if maybe, somewhere along the way, his wires have become crossed and he's become so invested in his own happy ending that he's decided that no one else's safety or comfort or the rest of their lives lived happily even matter anymore.

"I'm sorry, Veronica," He croaks.

And he pretends then that he doesn't hear her crying.

"I'm sorry too," She sobs, "I love you, Lance. P-please just… don't do anything stupid."

It's a long rest of the night after that. The hot water against his skin feels muted and never warm enough to quell the shakes that tremor through his bones. His blankets feel too stiff and cold and the shadows of the sun pushing light through his blinds warp into indecipherable but distracting shapes that draw his attention away from sleep until it's too early to doze off. The kids wake up. He can't slip into his dreams when he hears them talking and laughing and eating their breakfast down the hall.

He doesn't know if he made the right decision now, but there's no going back.

He doesn't know if he's taken things too far, but now, after everything that he's ruined here, he knows that he has to see this through until the end.

He wishes that Shiro were here to wrap a warm and comforting arm around him. To make him feel like everything is going to be okay.

He wishes that Keith was fed and happy and not surely withering away, undying in agony as he starves in that dark and barren apartment.

Chapter End Notes

> Quick note: When I started writing this story, the names of Lance's siblings and the kids weren't confirmed yet! But once Veronica was established as a bigger character in Season 7, I thought that making her a bigger character in this story as well

would be a better idea than going with the sibling who actually had kids. As such, I might have... ripped off a couple of the supposed names for the canon niece and nephew, but don't look at me too hard, okay? Hahaha, be gentle with me, please.

Chapter 22

“Uncle Lance, do you believe in monsters?”

Lance looks up from the peanut butter that he’s currently spreading over an admittedly semi-stale piece of bread with a flimsy butter knife, biting the inside of his cheek as he stares at the chipped paint of the cabinet in front of him and chewing on Nadia’s words. She’s sitting behind him at the kitchen table, shading the smiling cartoon faces in her coloring book as the boys watch Sunday morning cartoons and play together in the other room. Her voice is light and casual as though she doesn’t understand the weight of her words. He knows that there’s no way that she could possibly understand it, how relevant a question it is to everything that’s been driving his life for the last few months. But he does wonder, guiltily, if he might have made it too obvious. If he’d been sloppy, or if there’s even an ounce of a possibility that she might understand what’s been going on between her uncle and his handsome friend that her mom is just too grown up and jaded to grasp.

Little kids, Lance knows, are far more open to the concept of the supernatural than adults are. It wouldn’t be inconceivable to consider that her mother might have let slip how strange he’s been acting and that Nadia came up with her own theories. Charged, of course, by her love of Halloween and the G-Rated animated monster movies that they watch together even out of season. Amplified by a hope of hers that she’s never been quiet about: that maybe all of the adults are wrong or lying and out there somewhere in the big, mysterious world beyond their small town, something extraordinary exists in the shadows.

She isn’t wrong, of course. She’s a sharp kid.

But he doesn’t think that it’s his place now to illuminate her.

Veronica had taken off earlier in the morning to spend the day with a friend of hers. Some girl whose name he didn’t recognize, who continues to only make him more suspicious the more he thinks about it. He suspects, by the flustered way that Veronica had dodged his questions about it, that this friend is probably the same person who sent those weird messages to her phone, but he hadn’t been brave enough to confront her more clearly. If anything, the kids hadn’t seemed at all perplexed by it, and usually, they’re nosier than he is. He wonders if he could pilfer some information out of them if he

sweetens the pot a little—extra dessert or more TV time, or some random dollar toys that he can afford at the convenience store next time that he clocks in. He might be able to just ask them about it too, but he can't guarantee that they won't tell Veronica later. Their insistence to divulge every secret to their mother isn't a bad trait to have at their ages, so he doesn't want to drive that wedge between them and their mom if he can help it, but… He'd like to know without actually having to ask it. He'd like, for once, to have even the slightest hint of Veronica's seemingly superhuman maternal instincts just so he could know with certainty that something was amiss when she'd rushed through the door and practically thrown herself into the car before it sped off.

Definitely not suspicious at all, Veronica. He clicks his tongue, shaking his head and willing away the old frustration as it bubbles up in his chest.

He hadn't seen the person's face through the apartment window, behind the tinted windows of their car parked in the courtyard, but he'd decided that maybe babysitting on his day off might be the olive branch that he offers Veronica as the two of them wait nervously for his clock to run out.

They haven't talked about it, not really, but things have been weird between them since they talked the other night. He knows that Veronica has been trying, but he isn't sure if there's any fixing things, now that she's asked him so clearly to leave and he knows that he's already put all of them at risk. But she's making the best of it, he knows that too. She'd even told the kids, before she'd left, *"If your uncle's friend Ryou comes over today, be nice to him, okay?"* before planting a gentle kiss on all three of their heads, one after another, and shrugging on her coat before traipsing through the door. She'd sped up once she'd gotten outside, in a comical display that Lance had watched with much amusement through the sliding glass door. She'd seemed to understand that he'd be spying on her and she'd wanted to get out of here before he'd collected too much information. He wonders if she's dreading that conversation too, after so much time spent as the only two people in the world that they could rely on, they're both, now, finding other people. It shouldn't feel so sad. Veronica shouldn't have to worry that Shiro is going to hurt him. Lance shouldn't have to worry that this mystery partner is going to leave Veronica and her kids as their father did years before.

But it's normal to worry, Shiro told him when he'd brought it up. It's normal to think of the worst sometimes, even when you should be

hoping for the best. Veronica had called the police department and complained about their detective's inappropriate confrontation at the supermarket, but she hadn't told Lance in detail what had even transpired there. What Sanda might have said to her. Why she still seems so shaken by the memory of it. Why she's started driving five minutes further to pick up eggs and milk from a different location, and signed the kids up for latchkey instead of allowing them to take the bus home two hours before she gets off of work.

Lance understands Shiro's words when he thinks about it—how he hopes that maybe filing that complaint will abate Sanda's pursuit of him, and stop her from going after his family again. How, secretly, fearfully, he wonders if it might only make things worse.

He shakes his head, wiping the excess peanut butter from his knife onto the clean piece of bread next to it, before unscrewing the lid from the jelly and stirring the knife inside to break up the pieces of it.

"Why do you ask, sweetheart?" He asks, successfully side-stepping her question in an attempt to keep things less serious. He isn't sure if he could reassure her properly anymore, but there's a part of him that feels guilty lying about it, now that he knows with certainty that there are a lot of things in the world that seem fake, at first, but most certainly are not. "Did you have a bad dream last night?"

Nadia doesn't answer for a moment, but he can hear the scratching of her crayons pausing over the paper. He places the two pieces of bread together and cuts off the crusts, slicing them diagonally down the middle and turning to her with the plate in hand. He takes a few steps forward to the table, setting the plate by Nadia's half-drank glass of milk and sliding into the seat next to her. She's coloring a page designed with a smiling wolfman holding a giant pumpkin over his shoulder. He wonders why she's always been so adamant about playing with her Halloween toys and watching her monster movies well after the holiday ends. He wonders if she takes after him in that way, always drawn unyieldingly to the macabre and anything that goes bump in the night.

He wonders if Nadia will grow up to be the kind of person who would leave with a creature like Keith if the opportunity were to arise, but he doesn't like thinking about it. He doesn't like considering that Veronica could lose a brother and a daughter in exactly the same way.

Instead, he prods the plate closer to her book, pestering her until she sets down her crayon and turns her attention to the food that she'd

just asked for moments ago.

“I’m not afraid of monsters,” Nadia tells him, mouth full of sandwich that he doesn’t even bother to tell her to chew before she talks, “My teacher says aliens are real. She said people can’t be the best things in the universe. I asked her if humans are the best things on Earth and she didn’t get it. She laughed at me when I asked if maybe monsters were real too but they were just really good at hiding.”

Lance bites his lip to stop himself from smiling too wide. He rests his cheek in his hand, his elbow on the table, and contemplates making himself a sandwich too. He wonders how often Shiro has to eat, if he even really has to eat at all, or if he only does so for the pleasure of it or the routine. He can’t die in the traditional way, as far as Lance is aware. So arguably, he wouldn’t need nourishment either, but…

Lance isn’t sure about all of the technical details, but Shiro seems like the kind of person who would have tested it at some point. He reminds himself to ask Shiro about it the next time that they get a chance to talk. He distracts himself, instead, with the bright, scribbly crayon-colors in Nadia’s book.

“What kinds of monsters do you believe in?”

Nadia drops her sandwich and takes her cup in both hands. She takes a long drink before she sets it down, and turns to him with the wet of it clinging to her upper lip. There’s a sudden out of place seriousness that overtakes her and the sight of it is so unexpected and strangely mature for such a small child that Lance has to force himself not to laugh in the face of it.

Her brows lower, her lip juts out. She’s a tiny child wearing a bright white milk mustache and staring at him as though she’s about to reveal to him the greatest secrets of the universe.

Her voice is gravelly and low, hushed as though to keep this conversation between the two of them and not catch the attention of her brothers in the living room.

She leans closer in, her eyes wide and rounded and her dark pupils reflecting back pinprick images of Lance’s loopy half-smile and bedraggled hair.

“I know monsters are real, uncle Lance. I saw one.”

Suddenly, all humor drains from Lance as though someone turned a

valve inside of him and flushed it right down a drain.

He swallows, shudders a breath and turns himself away, looks at the boys still playing with their toys and the staticky images flicking by on the television. To the shaggy, sun-bleached rug and the splotches of old juice stains on the carpet. His pulse hitches in his veins and his mind flickers rapid speed through a Rolodex of various moments when he could have been too clumsy, gotten too cocky, and Nadia might have seen something that she shouldn't have.

"W-when?"

She focuses the intensity of her gaze on the last torn pieces of her sandwich, little hands rested on the edges of her plate as she seems to do her best to collect her thoughts. Lance studies the teeth indentations in the bread, thinks about the silvery scars on Shiro's arm. Thinks about how he'll look too, someday, littered with bite marks that never fade away completely.

"Before Christmas," she tells him conspiratorially , leaned so far in that the frizzed edges of her bedhead tickle his arm, "I couldn't sleep. I looked outside and I saw it climbing up the side of the apartment across from us. It broke the light. I tried telling mama that a monster was breaking all of the lights but she said that I just had a bad dream. But I saw it, uncle Lance! It looked like a person. It broke the light and ran into the woods. No one believes me but I saw it!"

She's fretful now, and Lance reaches out a comforting hand to rest on her small shoulder. He struggles to cobble together some semblance of a gentle smile, breath stalled in his throat and thoughts jammed in his brain as he realizes, after all this time, that other people can, in fact, see Keith. He can't quite wrap his head around what that means for the three of them, but it can't be anything good. But he knows, with the smallest shred of relief, that if that detective had seen Keith crawling through the night, she would have made that information known to them when she'd, interviewed them. She hasn't been particularly subtle so far, and something so substantial doesn't seem like the kind of proof that she'd keep to herself.

But right now, he doesn't know what to say to Nadia. She needs to hear something, some affirmation that she isn't stupid or crazy. Some reassurance that everything will be okay. But he knows that no one will ever believe her. He knows that she might carry this strange memory with her for the rest of her life, always wondering what in the world she saw that night but never certain that it was even there

at all.

“I believe you,” he tells her, “But you gotta keep it secret, okay? Sometimes grownups don’t wanna believe that things are real just because they haven’t seen them, but… don’t try to find it either. It’s okay if people don’t believe you, as long as you know what you saw. You don’t need to prove yourself to anyone.”

She pushes her plate away from her, further into the center of the table. It clicks against her milk glass and displaces a few of her crayons, but she pays it little mind. Lance grabs it wordlessly, rising from his seat and walking it to the trash can. He dumps the remaining pieces and skirts then to the sink, turning the knobs and lathering a sponge in soap before cleaning it off. It’s better to keep up with the chores instead of allowing the kids to pile their dirty plates in the sink. He’d like to actually spend his night off visiting Shiro and Keith instead of being held up with dishes, if he can help it.

He drops the plate in the rack by the sink and dries his hands on the towel hanging from the oven handle. Outside, the sun scores long golden lines through the cracks of the buildings and the still-bare trees, filtering light through the dust particles and the upheaved snow crystals. It’s silent and still and sparkling, blinding white. Veronica recently wiped down the windows, but he can already make out the beginnings of more fingerprints near the bottom of the glass.

He makes his way back to his seat, plopping down and resting his arms and elbows on the table. He drops his head to rest against his shoulder, focused on Nadia’s crayons scratching over a different picture in her book. This time, in the matte blank space of the inner back page, it seems that she’s doodled her own monster to fit among the others contained in the coloring book. It’s more scribbly and the outlines are jumpy and disconnected. It’s a thick black blob of crayon caked over stark white, strangely sinister when Lance compares it mentally to the smiling werewolves and laughing ghosts on the pages that exist tucked away in the book before it.

Nadia has always been gifted when it comes to art, and Lance is aware that the drawing that she’s hidden in the back of the book is one that she’s taken great care in crafting as perfectly as her little eight-year-old hands can manage. He recognizes the rows of windows and the cobbled brick exteriors and the parking lot down below, despite how uneven the lines are and how shaky and thick the black wall of coloring is around them. He can easily discern where the snow must have piled up atop the sleeping cars in the wide mouth of the parking

lot, illuminated by the street lamp, circled by the narrow fingers of a monster is reaching for it on the page. The creature itself is a solid dark blob, angular and thin with clawed fingers and wide, reflective eyes. Its jagged rows of teeth are an empty hollow left uncolored between the shadowed mass of its face. Nadia has given it a wild mop of hair that Lance recognizes right away, and it's hard now not to snap a photo of the picture and show it to Shiro later on. Perhaps, Lance thinks, this might be one of the only instances of Keith's existence cemented in photographic form. This crude and unpracticed drawing scribbled down in terror by his unknowing niece could be the sole proof that Keith ever existed in this universe at all.

Nadia's drawing doesn't delve deeper into the soft line of Keith's jaw or the endless, engulfing black of his eyes. Or the way that sometimes the light hits them and Lance is dazzled and surprised all over again to realize that they're violet, under all of the dark. The crayon etchings tell of a slender, nimble form and not the intoxicating curves of Keith's milky thighs or the shapely dip of his thin waist into his hips. Or how his hair falls masterfully into his face as though crafted that way tastefully by an artist that somehow conjured him from oil into living, sometimes breathing flesh.

It's evident that it's Keith only because Lance knows that it must be. Because he knows who's responsible for the street lamp destruction and what sort of creature could be capable of climbing a pole so high with only its bare hands and feet to assist it. But Lance realizes that he's never seen Keith as fearsome of a beast as this picture alludes to. He's never felt that he was untamable or evil, or that his soft lips could crack open in that wild grin. That he'd ever be capable of scaring someone in the way that Lance knows deep down that he's more than capable of being scary.

It's only at this moment that Lance realizes profoundly that he's on the inside of a glass bottle, under the narrow neck like a model ship. And he's looking out at a wide and unknowing world that doesn't understand what it feels like to exist inside. It's the most exclusive club, to know and be known by creatures like Keith and Shiro. Nadia should never understand what it feels like to place her hands against the glass and know with certainty that her voice won't travel far enough to be heard. No one on the outside could ever hope to grasp it.

Keith is beautiful and he's gentle and sometimes he's very lonely and sad. But to anyone else, on the outside, he's this monster on the page. Distant and enigmatic and dangerously sinister as he reaches out to only destroy with those long, narrow claws.

He clears his throat, reaching forward and placing the corner of the page between his fingers before tugging it closer to himself. There are little black dots of crayon dust speckled over the page, and he resists the urge to blow on them to clear them away.

“Do you think he was a mean monster, Nadia?” He asks before he can stop himself, head turned at an odd angle that aches in his neck after enough time passes, fingers still pinched around the corner as he focuses hard on this rendition of Keith, trying to imagine a time when he would have looked at him and seen the same thing.

Nadia tasks herself with adding more black to the corners of the page. It seems that she was taken aback by how thick the night had been when she’d witnessed Keith as well, and Lance isn’t surprised. He wonders if she heard the whispers too. He wonders if she felt those hundreds of invisible eyes watching her, or if maybe, Keith had been so distracted by the nightly ritual of light destruction that he hadn’t paid her any mind.

Nadia juts out her bottom lip. She furrows her brows and tightens her grip on the black crayon worn down to a small nub in her fist.

“Do you remember Soba?” She asks him then, low and gravelly, concentrated in such profound seriousness that Lance has trouble not laughing at her again, “He reminded me of Soba. Like when Soba got out of his cage and tried to eat Ms. Rizavi’s hamsters and we had to go outside and wait for the janitor to go get him and put him back.”

Lance bites his lip, covering the lower portion of his face with his hand to hide his grin. A small breath of a laugh escapes him, but Nadia doesn’t seem to notice. She’s so hyper-focused on her drawing again that she doesn’t seem to have time to waste on much else, as she continues to color thicker and darker black swatches over the small gaps at the corners of the page. Lance can already see where the black has come off and worn into the unfortunate grinning faces of three jack-o-lanterns on the final page, but Nadia is transfixed. She pays it no mind. She continues to color, in desperate pursuit of cementing the scene that she’d witnessed in this book forever, as though she might need the recollection later lest the details erode in time.

Lance wonders if she’ll stumble upon this drawing someday when she’s grown up and remember that supposed bad dream. He wonders what she’ll think of all of this when she’s grown up enough to be jaded and less dazzled by tales of the unknown. If she’ll carry this conspiracy with her for the rest of her life or if, someday, she might

move on from all of this and regard this conversation as nothing but her weird uncle trying to tease her by stoking a suspended belief in monsters that should have been squashed the moment that she voiced it.

But Lance does remember Soba, and he remembers that she asked a question that deserves an answer, and tells her as much.

“Yeah,” he laughs again, lightly, “He was a funny little guy, wasn’t he?”

Soba had been the pet snake that Nadia’s second-grade teacher, Ms. Rizavi, had kept in a sizable terrarium near the back of the classroom. He was a young corn snake, picked up from a reptile convention and bred for his lax temperament. He’d been friendly enough that, from time to time, he’d allow himself to be taken out of the tank and shown off to students during recess so Ms. Rizavi could inspire a love of even the creepy-crawlies in nature in her students.

Most of the time, however, Soba slept in his cage. Most of the time, he was nothing but a backdrop in the regular goings on of the class, until sometimes Ms. Rizavi would dangle a frozen mouse through the door in the lid and Nadia, in particular, would crowd around to watch him devour it whole.

He was a main character in the lesson about the life cycle. A predator, Nadia had learned, that could only eat meat and no vegetables. Ms. Rizavi introduced the children to chicken eggs incubated under heat lamps from her parents’ farm. She’d brought in mice and baby goats, and showcased these biology lessons with just the kind of hands-on education that inspired young children to find passion in it.

Nadia had been overwhelmed with a deep love of animals because of that teacher, and when Soba had inevitably escaped one day, she’d been inconsolably upset that no one had allowed her to stay behind and hunt down the rogue snake herself. Lance still remembers the phone call that the office staff had made to each of the children’s homes, and the drama that had unfolded when parents had been outraged by the mere prospect of their children potentially being attacked by a harmless cornsnake. Lance himself had found the entire thing to be particularly hilarious, and in the following months, had joked with Nadia about the ordeal each time that they’d made noodles for dinner.

“Watch out!” he’d say, *“These noodles are loose and they’re hungry!”*

This adds a level of humor to Nadia's brief brush with Keith through her window, even though he understands exactly what she was trying to tell him. Soba hadn't been an inherently violent animal. He wasn't capable of doing much damage when he'd only been about the circumference of Lance's thumb and less than the length of his wrist to his elbow. But there had been a wildness about him that Nadia recognized as different from a cat or a dog or the hamsters that he'd tried so desperately to hunt when he'd gotten out. Nadia had understood even as a child that some animals were domestic in the traditional sense, and that some creatures would be feral no matter how wholly a human chose to love them. She'd known that Soba would never be capable of going on a walk or playing fetch, or chasing a laser pointer through the winding path of desks in the classroom. She'd known that Soba wouldn't cuddle with her and that she needed to handle him with care, lest she get hurt.

Soba was a wild thing contained in a large, heated terrarium in the back of her grade school classroom, but he was a creature that could be dropped neatly into nature and thrive there without much of a need to grow acclimated, and she understood that. A feral creature like Soba was only as domesticated as long as he could be contained. A wild thing like Soba wouldn't understand that she loved him and he'd do only what he needed to do in order to survive.

Soba was just as likely to pierce Ms. Rizavi's fingers with his fangs as he was to catch a mouse. He was just as capable of seeing any of them as food or a threat as he was of leaving them alone. There's no such thing as camaraderie with wild creatures. And to some degree, maybe that's the allure of them. Lance would like to say that he has no way of relating to a frame of mind like that, but even privately, he knows that it would be a lie.

But he'd caught her, for weeks after Soba's attempted escape, roving through books about alligators and lizards and devouring any information that she could find about snakes. There was an uncultivated charm about them that she'd been drawn to, the realization that there was always a certain level of risk involved when a person stuck their hand into the cage to feed or pet or play with this specific kind of animal.

And thinking about Keith… Lance wonders if that's a fair assessment. He wonders if Keith will ever be truly domesticated or if maybe Shiro and himself, over time, will just learn how to survive safely in his presence.

“I wish I could meet a monster,” Nadia adds absently, continuing to scribble in the book.

And Lance, finally, laughs. He shoves up from the table to peek into the living room and ask the boys if they’re hungry for lunch now, too.

“Maybe you will someday,” he tells her, just as he passes her chair, placing a hand on the back of it that he ghosts along the wood, eyes focused on the flickering television in the living room, on the boys clacking their action figures together, on the yellow hue of the lamp casting dim shadows in the corners. “Don’t ever stop being curious, and maybe… someday you’ll get to meet a monster like that face-to-face.”

Shiro slips out of the bathroom and moves blindly through the dark. He makes his way towards the front door, having long-since mapped out the general layout of the apartment. It’s easy these days to move blindly through this space, but there’s always the smallest hint of worry that Lance might have left something behind that he’ll catch his foot on. And while he knows that tripping and falling over wouldn’t be that abnormal for him, he’d like to answer the door without having to explain to Lance moments later that the loud thunk that he’d heard inside was, in fact, his body dropping and making hard contact with the carpet because he hadn’t expected the addition of a rogue shirt or bookbag in his unseen path.

And he wouldn’t want to wake Keith right now either if he could help it. Keith has been particularly sensitive lately, and he’s done his best to limit the number of negative stimuli that he’s forced to coexist with, cultivated an atmosphere in this dark and chilled apartment that’s hopefully reminiscent enough with whatever kind of ecosystem that a creature like Keith is optimized for that he isn’t more uncomfortable than he absolutely has to be.

While Shiro is sure that the voices and the pulses and the sweet smell of blood through the walls all around them haven’t helped, at the very least, he knows that Keith won’t wake up and find himself blinded by too-bright light. Even if he might risk face-planting on the floor just to achieve that.

Thankfully, he doesn’t have to worry about that for too much longer,

when he arrives at the front door unscathed and uninhibited. He flips the lock and pulls it open slowly, peeking through the crack carefully as more of a force of habit than any suspicion that their late-night visitor could be coming here uninvited.

Lance has dutifully stopped by each night since Keith began sleeping in the tub again, and Shiro can't say that he minds the company, even though he feels increasingly guilty for forcing Lance to witness Keith in such a sorry state. Later on, maybe, once Keith has fed properly and he's back on his feet, Shiro will get an earful from Keith himself for allowing Lance to suffer in such a way. But for now, Lance maintains that he needs to get used to it eventually, and when it comes to his or Keith's wellbeing, he'd rather know the truth than be coddled or have the facts sugar coated for his own peace of mind.

And Lance, over these last few days, has proven himself to be exactly the kind of person that Shiro's been hoping that he would turn out to be, all this time.

He's been gentle when he's prompted Keith to feed from him and patient no matter how many times Keith turns him down. And he's stopped Shiro from giving too much blood, because he must know how upset Keith would be if he found out later. He's been an anchor keeping Shiro fastened firmly in reality, a solid shoulder to lean on when things only get harder day after day. And Lance hugs him when he opens the door, wraps both arms around him and surrounds him with his warmth and softness in the dark, pulling back after a wonderful moment of peace and quiet and gazes up at him with dark and hooded eyes.

"How are you holding up?"

His words are soft and sugar-sweet in Shiro's ears. He feels warmth blossom in his chest and fan out. He finds himself aching to close the gap between them and take Lance up in his arms again.

But he decides against it, because Lance is still shivering halfway outside in the cold. He steps backward instead, ushering Lance inside and allowing his hand to rest longer than it needs to on Lance's soft and warm shoulder as though he might be able to magically absorb the heat of him through that small amount of contact alone. But Lance radiates lightness and goodness and Shiro feels at ease just from standing close enough in his wavelength to benefit from it. He feels immediately calmer when Lance shuts the door behind him and offers him another wide smile. And he eases off, regrettably, so that Lance

can discard his coat and boots at the door.

Lance shudders once he places his things in their neat pile. He rubs his hands together and draws in a long breath, craning his neck through the blackness in the general direction of the cracked bathroom door.

“It’s been rough,” Shiro admits softly, surprising even himself with his honesty and the eagerness with which he offers this information with little prying on Lance’s part, “He’s definitely not getting any better. I’ve been trying to give him smaller amounts of my blood, supplemented by any animals that I can find, but… you know it’s been hard to grab anything with that detective still watching. I almost managed to take a deer from the side of the road last night, but I spotted her car on an adjacent street just as I started slowing down. She won’t give me a chance to make a move and… Keith’s not going to get better if I can only offer him a couple of pints of blood every few days. Eventually, he’s going to fall asleep and he might not wake up until a human gets close enough and… I don’t know if he’ll be able to stop himself from attacking even if it’s…”

Shiro trails off. He knows that Lance understands where that sentence would have ended up, knows that it’s the risk that both of them have been taking, allowing Lance to wander so close to Keith when Keith could, at any moment, become hungry enough that he might not be able to control himself. Shiro wants to trust that Keith wouldn’t hurt Lance, but he knows that it’s irresponsible to think so. That as much as Keith might care about both of them, there are certain facets of his wild instincts that just can’t be untrained, no matter how much he might love a person.

But Lance doesn’t reassure Shiro with words and he doesn’t argue that the power of their devotion will keep all of them safe. Instead, he places a comforting hand on Shiro’s shoulder, gentle but heavy enough that it roots him once again in the reality that, no matter what happens, they’ll tackle it together. Shiro takes a moment to collect himself, nodding, short and jerky, and lifting his hand to rest over Lance’s. His eyes find the bathroom door again and he bites his lip. Keith wasn’t awake when Lance got here, but his attention might be perked by the smell of human blood. He might manage to stay coherent at least long enough to thwart another of Lance’s attempts to feed him, but at least, in that event, Lance will know that he’s still strong enough to think straight. And both Lance and Shiro will know that they still have time to feed him before it’s too late.

It’ll be too dangerous to transport him if he isn’t coherent. It’s too

much of a risk, that someone might unknowingly attract his more feral attention and that he might do something that he regrets before he regains his bearings. Shiro has only seen Keith that hungry a couple of times in the past, and he knows that he's virtually unstoppable when he's ravenous enough. He knows that it will be impossible to hold him off or to save anyone, or to be subtle or quiet when Keith's driven more by his urges than any reason that he's managed to acquire over the years.

Like setting a wild wolf loose in the middle of a city. Like dumping kerosene over a forest and dropping a lit match.

Shiro shakes his head.

"You should go see him," he says then, squeezing Lance's hand, "He might wake up if he smells you."

Lance swallows audibly, and Shiro wishes that sending him in to see his boyfriend didn't feel quite as much like opening a tiger's cage and urging in an innocent goat. He wishes that he didn't feel so guilty about every aspect of this situation—allowing Keith's health to disintegrate to this lowly level, allowing Lance to risk his life just to see him, allowing this disaster with Detective Sanda to become so severe that he can't even collect roadkill without the fear of her witnessing it. Roadkill collection without a license is a fairly petty crime, but he doesn't even want to risk getting arrested or cited for that. He doesn't want to give her any good reason to suspect him, and he definitely doesn't want his name or prints officially in the system. He might move on and shed this temporary identity, but he knows that getting snagged in a paper trail could only be troublesome. He doesn't like the idea of leaving behind any discernible evidence that the police department could potentially use to track them down long after they've slipped on to a different place.

He owes it to Lance and Keith to be careful. He knows that so much more than just his own safety is riding on everything being done right.

Sanda might be thwarted for now, but she's zeroed in on both himself and Lance. And he gets the feeling that she won't let up until she finds something solid to sink her teeth into.

He heaves a breath, chasing away those troublesome thoughts and tucking them in the back of his head for later. Now isn't the time to get wrapped up in his fears and suspicions, when Lance still hovers so close and he's still so warm and accommodating as Shiro sits in his

awkward, extended silence.

He's offered a final gentle pat on the shoulder before Lance pulls away, easing slowly towards the bathroom. The door squeaks on its hinges as he tugs it open, and his quiet greeting upon stepping inside is enough to confirm to Shiro that yes, Keith was alerted the moment that Lance drew close enough by the smell of him and the sound of his organic heartbeat drawing nearer through the front door. Shiro lingers for a moment in the living room before following behind, hanging back in the threshold of the room and watching as Lance lowers himself to sit next to the tub with a hand hesitantly reaching forward to grasp Keith's tremoring, paper white fingers on the rim of it.

Keith's health has plunged to the extent that he almost doesn't even look like a person anymore. His cheeks are hollow and his pupils have expanded out, dilated and blown so big that they're blurry black ink blots filling white sclera with shadow. His thinned lips have pulled back to better reveal the sharp canines that hang over them, and his dry, thin skin is pulled so tightly around his bones that it almost seems as though it might tear around his joints if he moves around too hastily. His hair is knotted and unkempt and so diluted that it's nothing but a rat's nest of brassy tangles. His movements are slow and clumsy and jittered in a way that reminds Shiro of a videotape skittering over the same scene twice. As though his movements through the world have been scratched and his heaving body struggles to mirror the same jagged motions twice, each time that he attempts to situate himself.

His fingers, turned up to grasp at Lance, shake and jolt and his arm jerks back sharply and his head lulls and dips as though he might faint just from the movement alone. And Lance watches him quietly and patiently as extended minutes stretch out between the three of them wordlessly and Keith attempts to express in his motions alone that he's coherent enough to understand that Lance is the person who's sitting in front of him right now.

Keith's skeletal and trembling hand slots into Lance's eventually, agonizing effort expended for a task so simple that it squeezes mercilessly at Shiro's heart. He looks blindly through the dark without the ability to focus his attention on much of anything for too long, squinting as though it might still be too bright in here and focusing as much of his attention as he can on Lance's face just a few inches away from his.

"How are you feeling?" Lance asks him, which might sound silly in

context, might seem obvious and stupid to even consider asking, but Shiro knows that it's more about testing the waters of his coherency. Seeing if, maybe, he's still capable of stringing together sentences or if perhaps he's nothing but a moving corpse now.

"Tired," Keith says so softly that his voice is barely there at all, grainy and distant as though beamed from half-broken speakers hidden somewhere in the dark corners of the bathroom, "Hungry."

Lance bites his lip, nodding once, shallow and slow. He gazes down at the hand that holds Keith's and the veins in his arm turned up towards the ceiling. Shiro isn't sure how well he can see in the blackness here, but he also knows that it wouldn't be right to turn on the lights. He dithers between two possibilities and who he should be trying harder to accommodate. He wonders if it's okay to stand back and allow Lance to handle this one alone, or if he should be working harder to placate both of them.

He settles on the former. He doesn't know what he could do to help either of them, even if he had the strength and courage to do so.

"You should eat something," Lance says, "Let me feed you, then maybe Shiro can feed you too. That's better than nothing, isn't it? It's been long enough since Shiro fed you that he can help again, right?"

Lance turns back to look at Shiro. Shiro shudders for a short moment, hesitates as nerves rattle through him and clears his throat before nodding. He feels suddenly on edge, thinking about all of the endless, accidental ways that Keith could injure Lance. Thinking about how easy it would be to begin drinking and refuse to let go, to drain Lance dry as Shiro stands idly by and can do nothing to save either of them from that happening. He draws a tongue over dry lips. He shuffles his feet and stands straighter in the doorway.

"That could be dangerous," he says simply. Lance shakes his head.

"I trust Keith."

Shiro isn't sure why he does, doesn't know at which point Keith's given him any indication that he's even capable of sparing him in an emaciated state such as this. For all Lance has learned about the two of them, the last time that Keith starved, he nearly killed Shiro. And Shiro took responsibility for that, admitted that he should have stopped him when he felt himself slipping and that, if anything, he egged him on, but Lance has no reason to believe the truth in that either. Lance isn't experienced enough to know when to tell him to

stop.

Lance, in all ways that matter, has no reason to trust Keith, but nonetheless, Shiro can sense his resolve. And it seems that Keith can as well. He's watching Lance now, quiet and focused and unyielding, before his eyes slowly drop down to their hands clasped together, to Lance's dark veins.

He licks his lips.

"I don't want to hurt you."

Lance scoffs a laugh. A broad smile rolls out over his lips.

"You won't. I know you, and I know that you won't."

Keith's eyes then travel over and up to Shiro. He's unsure but he's shaking in anticipation. He's looking for guidance, begging for a good reason to continue starving here, if only so he doesn't have to risk hurting someone. Shiro shuffles closer into the room.

He drops down next to Lance, lifting his hand to his face and grasping the edge of his sleeve between his teeth, pulling it down to the center of his arm.

He then prods his hand closer into the tub, closer to Keith, smiling soft and guiltily as Keith's dark eyes find it and focus there, on the worn veins and the faint hints of aged scars. On the point at which he might be able to bury his teeth and draw blood. He licks his lips again. There's a sharpness regained to his eyes that wasn't there until he was offered this opportunity. Through their connection, Shiro can sense his hunger. He can feel the empty churning in his belly and the growing desperation to eat.

He feels his lungs flattened and used up, feels himself crushed under the profound weight of his own shortcomings and guilt. He shoves them away for now, to the back of his head. To the temporary resting place of all of his bad feelings until he's given the proper opportunity to hate himself and blame himself for everything that he wasn't good enough to do right.

"Why don't you start with me?" He says, shaken for a moment before he stops to swallow, to even his breath and fasten a smile over his lips that hopefully looks less manufactured in the dark, "Lance, watch closely so you can get a better idea of what you're getting into. The moment that you start feeling lightheaded, tell him. Do whatever you

can to stop him because you aren't going to be able to bounce back from it like I can if he overfeeds. Keith isn't going to be mad at you if you have to shove him away. He wants you to be safe too."

Lance trembles, nods and hums quietly in nervous understanding, then eases back.

He watches as Keith shifts just a little bit closer, grasping Shiro's arm in gentle, weak hands and drawing it nearer to his lips. Lance looks to Shiro for a moment, then to Keith again, and Shiro wonders what might be going through his thoughts right now. He wonders if he's regretting his offer to help Keith, or if somehow his resolve is unwavering enough that even the sight of Keith's sharp teeth burying themselves into Shiro's skin, and Shiro's quiet hiss at the pain of it, haven't rattled him enough to make him want to leave.

It's familiar enough of a sensation that Shiro barely feels it anymore, but he doesn't want Lance to feel falsely reassured. He doesn't want Lance to think that this will be nothing, as easy as getting a shot or having blood taken, but he doesn't know how to articulate that. How to explain to him that it's okay if it hurts and if he's afraid and that Keith won't judge him or blame him if he needs to stop earlier than Keith can get full. It's scary, the first time that a person finds themselves facing their mortality at the hands of a creature like Keith. There's a sense of vulnerability to it that Shiro hadn't anticipated the first time that he'd offered Keith his arm.

In the grasp of a monster so capable of hurting him, of putting out his lifeforce easier than wetted fingers smothering the flame of a candle. Keith could kill both of them now if he saw fit. He could attack them and take what he needed and they'd be utterly powerless to stop him. And Shiro feels that weakness as he grits his teeth through the sting of Keith's fangs piercing further down, pressed through skin and blood vessels and tucking against bone. He feels like a fly caught in a spider's web. Feels wholly as though he's at the mercy of a creature that chooses to let him live, and he has no say in the matter.

He doesn't know how to explain this to Lance. He doesn't know how to tell him that this experience will change him.

So he breathes instead in silence. He swallows shallowly as Keith begins to drag that wet tongue over his skin. The frigidness of Keith's body numbs the puncture points, and the firm grip that he has on Shiro's arm successfully slows his blood flow enough that Keith doesn't drink too much too fast and move things further than they

should go before Shiro is able to stop him.

He's been feeding Keith a little bit too often lately, and regretfully, he's forced to pry his arm away sooner than he might under regular circumstances. Keith's glassy eyes stay focused on the porcelain where Shiro's arm rested just moments ago, as Shiro lifts it away from him. He watches that spot as though he doesn't understand where his meal went, and when Shiro apologizes, Keith nods slowly, barely a movement, barely more than the faintest indication that he's heard him.

Lance shifts as though he's going to extend his arm again, then he pauses and pulls back. He's biting the inside of his lip, watching Keith intently for a moment before turning unsure eyes in Shiro's direction. And Shiro, pressing his wrist into the front of his shirt to put pressure on his wound, smiles softly, nods, then pushes up and skirts back a few feet, giving both of them enough room to do what they need to without suffocating them by hovering too close.

"Go ahead, Lance," he says, "if you're ready. But don't forget to tell him to stop whenever you need him to."

Shiro situates himself on the closed lid of the toilet, craning his neck and keeping a close watch on the two of them. He's still near enough that he might be able to step in if anything goes awry, but distant enough that he isn't crowding them. He crosses one leg over the other, rests his elbow on his knee and his face in his hand. He studies them as they move slowly, unpracticed together in the dark. And he feels strangely calm about everything. As though there's nothing at all to be worried about now, no matter how many ways he knows realistically that this could go very wrong.

Lance scoots as close to Keith as he can, and Keith grasps him by the shoulder and pulls him in, kissing him once, lingering in that place for an extended amount of time as just the slightest hint of light and color returns to his eyes. It's still too dark in here for even Shiro to make out much detail save for a thin outline of Keith's white face in the dark and the slim curve of Lance's jaw, the darker stain of color on Lance's skin, and the narrow outline of his arm as he offers his wrist to Keith.

And Shiro feels nervousness fill him as he watches Keith's lips press into Lance's skin, as he hears the hitch of Lance's breath when Keith's teeth puncture there.

But Lance sits still, furrows his brows and purses his lips and weathers through it. He's watching Keith now with an intensity that Shiro hasn't seen in him since he met him, and he can't help but continue to wonder exactly what sorts of thoughts are swirling around in his head. He knows that Lance offered to do this even as long ago as the first time that he found himself alone with Keith, and he wonders if he could have pushed through it back then. He wonders if Lance is truly the only one between the three of them really willing to do any hard thing necessary to survive in this life, or if maybe, now that he's experiencing it, he's kicking himself for even fooling himself into believing that he was ready back then, before he really understood how much it would hurt.

Shiro doesn't have any normal human experiences to compare the sensation to, but juxtaposed with the violent end that he'd met before Keith saved him, he'd never thought that the pain of these infrequent feedings was actually too bad. It was nothing but a needle's prick compared to being pulverized and pulled apart that night. And pain was muted when he woke up, which over time became so normalized that now, he isn't sure if he could even relate to how it must feel to someone like Lance anymore.

But to Lance, who might not have even so much as broken a bone in the past, perhaps it's agonizing. Perhaps he's doing all that he can now to stop himself from passing out or howling in pain or crying.

"O-okay," Lance huffs, "You gotta stop, buddy, sorry."

Keith backs off quicker than Shiro expects from him. There's dark liquid staining his lips, glossy on his exposed teeth and the cracks of his mouth, and his pupils are smaller and more focused now in the dark. He's staring up at Lance as Lance studies his wrist, as he hisses long and lowly and turns a wry smile in Shiro's direction.

"That wasn't so bad," he says, "Good thing I ate before I came though. This could've been like the time when I gave blood in high school before lunch and passed out in the cafeteria."

Shiro laughs, but when Lance pushes himself up to wobbly feet, he isn't completely convinced that he won't fall right back down. Shiro rises as well, ushering Lance over to the toilet seat and situating him there before busying himself with collecting bandages from the cabinet under the sink. Keith is wordless, but through their connection, Shiro can feel that he's stronger now. Maybe not all the way there, maybe not as strong as he could be and has been just

weeks in the past, but better. More aware and awake and more able to rise up from the tub if he so wanted to than he has been in days. And Shiro knows that it's all thanks to Lance, who, right now, looks as though he might faint any minute now.

Which only compels Shiro to work faster, to do his best to sloppily wrap Lance's wrist in a bandage one-handed, and to turn to inspect Keith watching both of them in the dark as he puts pressure on his wound.

"Do you need to go out and hunt?" Shiro asks him, and between them, an emphasis is made on the silent *'animals and not humans'* .

Keith shakes his head. He shoves up, wobbly, from the tub and steps over the edge of it. He settles next to Shiro crouched on the floor, reaching between his hand and fiddling with the bandage to right it. And he turns dark eyes then to Shiro, to Lance's low lids. Smiles for the first time that Shiro has seen him smile in ages, and allows his palms to rest, chilly and soft like slick velvet, over his skin.

"Thank you," he says then, quiet and clearly just a little embarrassed, "I'll be okay."

"But will you?" Shiro asks slowly, turning his attention back to Lance.

Lance's responding grin is goofy. His words are slurred and his jaw is slack, and he doesn't argue as they both take him by the arms and lead him to the sorry remains of the few blankets that Shiro's been sleeping on the in the empty living room.

"I'll be fine in the morning," he says, "But Shiro? You owe me breakfast again when we wake up. I need sugar. Lots of it. Pancakes, syrup—with blueberries. I need something carb-loaded ASAP."

That's fair enough, Shiro thinks. It's an even trade.

Keith frets over Lance as they lie down together, skirts away to the bathroom to grab the bandages and tie one around Shiro's wound, too, before he slips through the window to explore for the first time in days. He isn't gone nearly as long as he usually stays away. He comes back just as Shiro is slipping into unconsciousness, tucking himself on Lance's empty side, reaching over him with cold fingers to lace between Shiro's.

They fall asleep together for a second time.

Shiro, to the sound of Lance's softly-beating heart and the smooth softness of Keith's fingers touching him.

And Keith, hours later, just as the sun begins to skim the horizon and presses glaring orange light against the black adhesive on the windows. Kept awake for long hours prior admiring the two people in the whole wide and lonely world who he knows, undoubtedly, would do anything for him.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Nadia told me that you said her monster friend is real.”

Lance looks up from the tax papers that he’s filling out at the kitchen table, wondering if there’s even a point in filing this year when, truthfully, he probably won’t be around to collect the money. If anything, maybe his return will help Veronica as the person written as his beneficiary on all of his forms, and maybe it looks better if he goes about his days now as though he isn’t planning on up and leaving in a few months, but… Something about it feels silly anyway. In a world where the supernatural is real and it creeps in the dark nights, where people die in inexplicable ways and rogue cops hunt phantoms that dance just beyond their fingertips, Lance, now, is filing his taxes.

It’s just mundane and ordinary enough to feel completely out of place. It’s boring enough that he feels like the kind of person who might stop to finish his glass of wine as a cruise ship plummets deep into frigid seas. The world is on fire and Lance McClain still refers to his W2s two or three times each time that he raises his pen to scribble down the appropriate numbers in their spaces. He drinks from a mug with a smiling cartoon cat on it. He drizzles his waffles in an extra layer of syrup to mask the flavor clinging to them from their extended stay shoved at the back of the freezer.

And he sits still, allows her words to simmer in the back of his thoughts.

He did say that, he knows, and there’s no good reason to potentially get poor Nadia in trouble for lying when she was only telling the truth. When she must have thought naively that Uncle Lance was completely in her corner and not spouting off the first inane nonsense that came to mind when Keith’s presence has overtaken his existence to such a severe extent that thoughts of him always crawl just at the back of his tongue.

He mulls over how to apologize, how to explain. He wonders if he’d be better off pretending that he was just joking around and forgot to say “gotcha!”

He isn't sure if the truth—that monsters are real and that he knows with absolute certainty that Nadia's monster, in particular, was, in fact, scaling the lamp post that night—or if perhaps he might be better off playing dumb and pretending, for his own sake and Veronica's mental wellbeing, that as he often does, he hadn't thought before he'd opened his big, dumb mouth.

He doesn't respond to Veronica's question quickly enough, it seems. She clicks her tongue and trudges forward from her spot, leaned against the kitchen counter, pulling out the chair across from him with a loud screech of the feet against the tile and slumping down into the seat. Her eyes are squinted in frustration and focused solely on his face. He pretends that he doesn't see her out of his peripherals, jotting down the last four digits of his social security number for the third time on the sheet in front of him and studying his W2 idly, as though it might offer him some new information.

Veronica's coffee, shoved on the table between them, clacks against the wood and shoves a small stack of his files sliding from their messy pile to spread out wider. From the corner of his eye, he can see a rogue pay stub flutter down to the floor, but he doesn't make an effort to pick it up. Small speckles of liquid pop from the edge of the mug and dot the table, coming close, but thankfully falling a few centimeters short of bleeding into the edges of his form.

Veronica clears her throat. Lance swallows thickly and trains his eyes on the uniform rows of black-printed letters and numbers on his W2.

"Lance, what the Hell is wrong with you?" Her words are harsh and gritty with exhaustion. They're punctuated with a loud sigh and a hand rubbed tiredly over her face. "You know you can't just tell the kids that monsters are real. Like, are you serious? Do you think it's good for Nadia to grow up thinking that adults are lying to her? Or that we're too stupid to understand the truth and she shouldn't bother even trying to tell us anything? Do you know how hard it is for me to convince her of anything when you tell her things like that?"

Lance clears his throat, his pen pressed hard enough into the paper that a small blot of ink bleeds through, blending together two letters and creating a small, indecipherable blob in the center of the box. He sighs, dropping the pen and allowing it to roll into the center of the table, clicking against Veronica's glass. Then he reaches over, uncaps the whiteout, and dots it over the mess that he's made on the page.

He raises his eyes to meet hers. For a moment, they simply stare at

each other.

“There’s nothing wrong with believing in things, Veronica,” he tells her, “the boys still believe in Santa.”

Veronica lifts her head, leveling him with a firm frown before pulling her glasses from her nose and pinching the bridge of it. Her hair is still messy and frizzy with bedhead. Her lenses are smudged with wide thumbprints where she might have grabbed at them blindly when she woke up. She looks smaller here, frailer and washed out. She’s flesh and bone and hot blood pumping through thin veins. She’s sunbleached and dried out like the adhesive Christmas-themed window clings that both of them continue to forget to take down from the window.

He feels guilty, but decides to be petulant. He isn’t sure why. He doesn’t know why he can’t just make things easier on her and admit that he messed up. Why Nadia believing in Keith means so much, suddenly, when he should really be doing everything in his power to keep this secret better kept.

Veronica tugs her fingers through the knots in her hair. She lowers her head and gropes for a moment at her neck, working out the tenseness there. She’s a tightly-coiled ball of nerves, he knows. He made her that way. Lately, it seems that he’s only been very good at making things harder for her.

“Santa is a normal thing for kids to believe in. If Nadia keeps telling her teacher that she saw some kind of creature roaming around our apartment complex, she’s going to contact CPS. Or a shrink! Or someone else who’s gonna make my life more difficult. She just had a bad dream, Lance. It’s not fair to take advantage of that just to… push whatever agenda you have here. And it’s not fair for you to keep punishing me like this just because *you’re* leaving. That’s not my fault. You’re the one who decided to make that commitment, and… I want you to live your life, okay? I want you to do what makes you happy, but I’m not pushing you out. You just—you have to understand that you can’t just wreck things and stay. You can either be sneaky and weird and stress me out before you go, or you can get your act together and stay here.”

Lance caps the whiteout and sets it down quietly on the table. He pushes the papers to the side, mindfully avoiding the dots of coffee on the surface of it and allowing his full attention to settle on his sister. He studies her for a moment, compartmentalizing the way that her

accusations prickle uncomfortably under his skin. He can't tell her that Nadia should believe in these things because he's seen them. He can't tell her that he only told Nadia to keep believing in things like that because he hadn't realized that she'd tell Veronica later on.

And it's not fair, when he thinks about it. When he really considers the consequences of his actions, he knows that he's done something wrong and he should apologize.

Under his sleeve, he can feel the punctures where Keith sunk his teeth fizzling and twinging, as though something lives just under the concave surface of the bites. They ache still, just a little, and they've left behind strange sensations that often keep him up when he should be sleeping early in the morning until the sun rises fully and the light of it bathes his bedroom in such vivid oranges and yellows that they burn against his eyelids and refuse to let him sleep. He hasn't felt smarter or stronger or bulletproof. He hasn't found himself yearning for raw meat or human blood and the pancakes that he ate with Shiro the next morning were just as delicious as he'd been hoping for. He's been studying himself infrequently, each time that he's been afforded a reflective surface to gaze into. He isn't more handsome and his skin maintains its lively, dark tones. He's virtually unchanged aside from the lingering lightheadedness and the wounds embedded deep in his skin. The weakness of his grip and the small pulses of pain that still ricochet through his tendons as the cuts close up. He doesn't know if he's disappointed or relieved, or if he might opt to trade the stinging just under the surface of his skin for something fantastical enough that he'd more willingly guard its secret with his life.

He breathes in deeply. He closes his eyes and runs a hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry," he tells her finally, "I wasn't thinking."

Veronica brushes her hair out of her face, rubs at her red-rimmed eyes and shoves her glasses back on. She rests her chin on both hands clasped under it and trains her eyes on the sliding glass door. Outside, the sun hangs just above the cage of buildings surrounding their apartment. The snow is piled high but the sky is still and dim and monochrome. Through the cloudy sky, the snowfall, for now, has halted. It's like a backdrop in a movie or an unmoving green screen edited behind the video of an anchor on the news. It seems to Lance as though he might be able to slide open the door and reach up to drag his fingers over the textures of the clouds.

He doesn't know how to tell her that he's tired of living in a world without motion. He doesn't know the right words to express to her that he feels stalled here, too, like the blot of a man in an oil painting, headed nowhere fast, never reaching that destination. Forever compressed between the grooves of the canvas and the thick lines of paint, tragically stunted and held down forever if he doesn't someday learn how to unhinge himself and sneak away.

He knows that it would be pointless to explain it to her anyway. She understands, she's made that clear. She isn't a mother bird desperately attempting to guard her nest and trap her babies inside of it. She wants him to spread his wings and try to fly, if he wants to, but she doesn't understand where he'll go. Or what he longs for. Or why he's chosen to hesitate here just long enough to kick away the twigs and trash the nest and inhibit her from carrying on without him once he leaves.

And that's the part that's even more impossible to explain. He isn't doing this on purpose. He isn't trying to make things harder. But telling Veronica that it isn't his fault means nothing if he can't explain to her why. Telling her that the deaths and disappearances and the darkness consuming this entire town are all just symptoms of his inevitable exit would only make things more complicated.

So he stays silent. He allows his words to fester in the quiet as Veronica reaches forward to take another sip of her coffee. It jitters as her hands shake. He bites the urge to apologize for that too.

Veronica is off today, but later in the evening, Lance has to start his shift at the convenience store. After he finishes with the paperwork, he's going to try to take a nap, but he doesn't have much faith in his ability to do so.

Part of him misses Shiro's apartment and the cot laid out on the floor. It's easier to sleep with the sun blocked out. It's more comfortable, even without a mattress, sandwiched between both of them. He's already too spoiled by their perpetual invitations. And he doesn't spend enough time at home. He knows that he'll regret that once he leaves.

"It's okay," Veronica says then, "I'm just—I'm so stressed out about all of this. I'm worried about you, and about… things with Ryou. I trust you, I really do, but I held you when you were a baby and I watched you grow up. I still remember how excited you were when we moved and you got to play in the snow for the first time. I still remember

how much you cried when I went away to college. And then I came back raised you after mom and dad…"

Her words grow quieter and damper until she trails off. She's sniffling softly, and as Lance busies himself with pretending to look over his papers, he pretends that he doesn't hear it. He knows that she doesn't want his comfort right now. He knows that she's doing everything in her power to be strong.

"This thing with Nadia and the monsters, I don't know. I know it's not related, that… sometimes you get kind of whimsical with the kids and I know you're always trying to teach them to maintain their imaginations and be free-thinkers and all that, but… I don't know, there was part of me that just felt so terrified. Like that you were going to run off to one of those hokey vampire colonies in New Orleans or something. Like Ryou had gotten you hooked on the idea that monsters are real or something and you guys had to—to like, hunt them or something."

Her laughter is loud and wavered by her tears. She rubs at her eyes with one hand as the other rests, shaking, on the handle of her coffee mug.

"Nadia is so much like you—so adventurous and always dreaming that things can be better than they are. And that's scary. It's scary thinking that my daughter might leave like you someday. That if some handsome stranger or whatever tried to convince her to run away, she might. I shouldn't be like this, I… I know, but… I'm really terrified for you, Lance. I know that *I'll* be okay, but… will you?"

Lance bites the inside of his lip, sucking in the last remnants of a breath that gets caught around the growing lump in his throat. He drops the pen again, running a hand through his hair and ducking his head and wondering how in the world he's supposed to work his way out of this, now, when Veronica so obviously needs to hear the truth that he absolutely can't offer her. He knows that it would only put her in danger if she knew. He knows that if they leave and Detective Sanda continues picking at the pieces of the cases that they leave behind, Veronica is more than likely going to be her first go-to. And he also knows that, at least, if Veronica knows little more than she knows now, then maybe there won't be any reason to keep bothering her. Maybe Sanda will get the picture and decide that it's better to leave her alone.

He can only hope, at least.

He shoves up straighter in his seat, watching Veronica's puffy eyes behind her glasses and her disheveled hair and the wrinkled neck of her pajama shirt worn so threadbare that it seems as though it might tear the moment that she turns in the wrong direction and puts too much strain on it. He watches the steam rolling from the rim of her coffee mug and the way that her short and well-manicured nails glisten in the morning light, how the gold of it wraps around her and seems to glow just under the surface, like treasure peeking out of a chest in ocean water. Like a tired and too-stressed mother of three young children begging her idiot brother to stop making her lose sleep over how irresponsible he is.

He sighs again.

"I'll be okay," he tells her, "Everything is going to be okay."

Veronica breathes in deeply, pausing to hold it, siphoning it out. She closes her eyes and clicks her nails against her mug, and she turns then, slowly, to smile at him.

"I hope so," She tells him, "And if you really are going to become some kind of New Orleans vampire hunter, could you at least send me a card from time to time to let me know that you're okay?"

He grins wide and he laughs, scratches uncomfortably at the back of his neck and stays mindful of how far up his arm his long sleeves creep. He tells her that he'll send her a card every holiday and birthday, maybe some fangs and he recovers that she can thread into necklaces for the kids. Maybe some garlic cloves and real wood from a deconstructed coffin.

It feels easy to pretend that it isn't real, just for a while.

For a fleeting moment in time, they're just a brother and sister joking over their morning coffee, stressing about taxes, living in a slow and quiet, normal world. Struggling through the day-to-day.

Lance can't fully connect to that person anymore, but for a while, it feels nice to revisit him.

But he thinks about it later, as he's mopping the floor in the convenience store, about those apparent vampire covens in New Orleans. He searches the term on his phone and spends his lunch break watching ten-minute video documentaries, then sifting through

related articles online. He thinks about the muddy swamps and the gators sunk under murky water surfaces and the lightning bugs illuminating the sky in a blanket of a thousand extra stars. He wonders if he could feel at home wrapped in the thick summer heat there and the stink of bloated wood rotting in wet trenches, the thick mud sucking at the bottoms of his boots in place of the frail snow here, and the humidity, ever-present, where the air here has always been so thin.

He wonders if Keith would enjoy roving the low-hanging branches of the tired, slumped trees and creeping through a night that felt alive with a million different animals that Lance could never hope to learn the names of.

And if Shiro, too, would feel invigorated in such a strange, new place. If the bogs and the superstitions and the vibrant late-night parties could thrum through him in a neverending pulse that might resuscitate him permanently, once and for all.

It would be easy to disappear into a big city. It would be so simple to present Keith as just another edgy twenty-something chasing childish fantasies of being someone unique and special in an ocean of similar faces. He wouldn't be out of place there, in the clubs that Lance finds online where patrons taste each other's blood, where everyone, it seems, tries so desperately to propel themselves into the spotlight of the perpetual supernatural hype. Keith could roam the streets without worry of the people who might see him. Brief flashes of him among the crowds could be brushed off as just another weirdo getting entirely too invested in the vibe there.

He could meet people and speak to them. He could learn to connect to others in a place like that, instead of biding his time watching them from a distance and wondering what sorts of people they might be up close.

There are places in the city that fasten fake fangs in people's mouths. There are night clubs where these so-called vampires connect with potential coven members and seduce "regular humans" into allowing them to taste their blood.

It's just the kind of weirdness that Lance was hoping to find somewhere. It's just the kind of thing that Veronica probably expects that he's more reasonably gotten carried away with, and not the cover for the truth that he's been so desperately vying after.

It's fun and lighthearted and no one takes it more seriously than Lance could reasonably expect. And they wouldn't suspect anything, were Keith to wander through the streets at night, even as inhuman and ethereal as he is. He wouldn't be out of place in the slightest, in a world so charged by the need for something grander than reality that they've created their own mystifying pocket of the extraordinary just in the heart of New Orleans.

It almost seems too good to be true. He checks the publishing dates of each article and video to a near-obsessive level, paying painstaking attention to any URLs that might allude to a parody website, any entries written on April Fool's Day.

But it seems to be the real deal, seems to be a potential lead.

And it seems to be the first hint that he's been given that perhaps he might be able to make use of himself in this relationship after all.

He takes notes in a small pocket notebook that he's supposed to use to count stock at the end of the night. He makes a mental note to bring this up to Shiro later and to discuss whether or not it's deserving of some further research. Louisiana is warm, if Lance remembers correctly from a frankly limited and dusty recollection of a geography course that he snoozed through most of in high school. It's humid but definitely not as miserable as this mountainous frozen Hell, and he thinks that he could get used to it, in time. He thinks that, if the ocean is accessible, at least, he could learn to love it just fine.

And the rest of his shift is spent conspiring, taking notes, watching videos, reading articles. He's so entranced in this research that he doesn't even notice that it's closing time until a customer pokes their head in twenty minutes late and asks if they're still open. Apologetically, he allows them to check out and locks the doors after them, flips off the lighted sign, collects himself and begins the closing routine. He's running behind now, but he's buzzing with life, floating so far above Cloud 9 that he can't even make out the hard ground far beneath him anymore. He's so excited to reveal the sudden ace that he's hidden up his sleeve that he doesn't even care about how sloppy of a job he's done closing up when he pulls on his coat and steps outside and locks the door behind him.

It's chilly, just as it always is, but he feels warmed by hopefulness. He feels like the night itself is brighter and more welcoming, and he's so elated that he even ignores the familiar whispers whipping past his ears as he scurries across the parking lot and rounds the corner of the

sidewalk at the mouth of it.

Keith, over the last few days, has been doing a lot better. He's been feeding on and off from both of them, allowing them a couple of days between to heal. He's littered Lance's wrist with slow-healing marks that still tingle with the cold ghost of his icy lips. And when Lance caved two nights ago and slept over again, he'd sneaked out just before Lance or Shiro had gone to sleep to make his rounds through the woods and supplement their blood with whatever small animals he could grab. He'd come back smelling like firewood, with little twigs and random debris sprouted from in his hair. His feet had been so caked in mud that Shiro had actually lifted him up from the entryway and carried him into the bathroom so he could wash his feet without staining the carpet.

He'd told them that he'd stumbled upon a campsite during his hunt and that he'd watched the campers stoking their fire and eating s'mores—which he hadn't identified by name, but described in such a perplexed and nonsensical way that Lance hadn't been able to stop himself from laughing at each of the words that had tumbled with uncertainty from his mouth.

"Biscuits, maybe? Crackers? I don't know. But… it was a sandwich with white tar stuff in the middle. And chocolate—you know, chocolate, right? The brown stuff? It looked disgusting. They put the white tar-things on sticks and burned them over the fire and made cracker sandwiches with them. Humans will eat anything."

Lance had whooped a laugh so loud that he'd been forced to shove his hand over his lips to mute himself. Shiro had shaken his head as he toweled Keith's wet legs, swung over the edge of the tub where he sat. Keith had fixed Lance with a stern and unamused frown, jutted up his chin and turned his eyes away as though dismissing him entirely. Time had passed quietly until Shiro was finished with him and the two of them exchanged a short series of kisses and Keith whispered a hushed and bashful thanks for his service. He'd been twitchy with what Lance would realize later was his overwhelming need to share the rest of his experiences with them, and it wasn't until they'd coiled together on the cot again and Lance had buried his nose into Keith's campfire-scented hair that he'd allowed the words to flow tiredly into the dark silence settled over them.

He'd talked about the camper's pulses and the hang of their breath in the cold air. He'd recounted how they hadn't sensed eyes on them but how he'd watched anyway. Feeling distanced from them like he was

witnessing a program on a television screen. He'd described them in a way that reminded Lance a whole lot of fast food commercials—their smells and the taste of them strong in the air. He'd talked about their sounds and the warmth of the fire and how it was too bright but he couldn't look away. It was too possessing to fall asleep during, the way that he explained it. How his sensations could be described in a way that Lance could almost imagine how it might feel to be a creature that felt things so saturated and filtered the world only through its limited scope of experience.

Keith had looped back multiple times to talk about the way that they talked and laughed and how they reached out to touch hands to each other's shoulders. He'd talked about the way that the flickering fire had reflected in refracted gold in their darkened eyes. He'd said that the shadows had moved over their skin and warped their expressions, and explained the way that the blood flooded under their cheeks had been so vibrant and soft. Shiro made a comment then about how Keith liked to watch people. Keith didn't deny it, but he went silent for a moment as though the concept of that embarrassed him.

Lance had wondered how many times he'd been Keith's chosen nightly program before they'd been properly introduced. He'd wondered how many times since then Keith still hadn't been able to stop himself from following behind him and watching.

He hadn't been entirely positive why Keith's excitement ached in his chest. He wasn't vibrating with these stories as Nadia or the boys might, he wasn't bouncing around and animatedly retelling every minuscule detail at a pace so fast that neither Shiro nor Lance could keep up. But he'd talked more when he spoke about the people who he stumbled upon during his travels than he talked about anything else.

Lance had wondered if it was possible for a creature like Keith to feel lonely.

He'd wondered, guiltily, if Keith longed to be surrounded by monsters that could understand him better than any humans ever could.

But that night, and the subsequent nights following when Lance had been bold enough to revisit, had been peaceful and serene in ways that he wouldn't have ever imagined. Shiro was always gentle, always careful. He touched both of them as though they were cracked glass. He made coffee in the morning on the weekends, when Lance could afford to stick around long enough to drink it. The two of them

housed themselves on the balcony while Shiro smoked and Keith slept inside. They talked about the places that Shiro had visited and all of the people who he used to be. Shiro told him hilarious anecdotes in that same even and quiet voice, pausing with a small, sly smile as Lance guffawed, as he fawned over the new information, as he devoured as much of Shiro's past as he could get his hands on, the moment that Shiro was willing to divulge it to him.

Lance would then tuck himself up against Keith's back, or wiggle into the center, or coax Shiro to wedge between them and wrap an arm around his wide chest or the severe dip of his waist into his full and rounded hips. When Lance found himself situated next to Keith, he'd marvel unendingly at how clingy he could be in sleep. How he'd wake up just as Lance was untangling them and offer him sleepy kisses, warm still from his close proximity to human heat, eyes squinted and brows crooked and grumpy as he realized that he'd be occupying the cot alone after Shiro and Lance left.

It hasn't been domestic bliss quite yet, and maybe just the smallest sample of a life that's waiting for him in the very new future, but it's a routine that he's grown so accustomed to over such a short period of time that he can't imagine his life without it now. Even without the news that he's so eager to break to both of them, he knows that he'd be just as eager to rush back to their apartment and see them again. He's ready to greet Shiro with a smile and open arms when he gets home from work. He's ready to wrap Keith up in blankets and warm him after he's grown cold outside in the snow.

And despite his eagerness, he still remembers to grab the word find book that he'd purchased at the beginning of his shift and stored underneath the counter. He shoves it into the pocket of his coat along with a candy bar that he'd gotten for Shiro. He'd learned of Shiro's sweet tooth from the endless candy bar wrappers that they'd cleaned out of his car, as per Lance's endless pestering and aggressive offers to help him tidy up. It had taken nearly two hours and three stuffed trash bags to clear out all of the mess, but the car had looked at least three times nicer when the clutter was cleared from the floor. And while he doesn't have indisputable proof, he maintains the theory that the car even ran smoother once they removed a solid mass of weight from inside of it.

The puzzle discovery had been more of an accident. In the middle of the night, the last time that he'd stayed over, he'd risen from the cot to pour himself a glass of water in the kitchen. Frequently unused and only inhabited in brief moments as Shiro and himself had passed

through on their way to the balcony, Lance hadn't been familiar enough with the layout of it even in the light to make sense of any discernible path in the darkness. Just around the corner, as he'd been blindly feeling his route along the wall, his shin had bumped into a sizable stack of papers that had tumbled loudly and splayed out all along the tiles. Shiro had reassured him groggily that it was okay, he shouldn't worry about it. Just get his water and come back to bed.

But in the morning, he'd lit the room up with his phone's flashlight and marveled at the countless word finds and crosswords and sudokus filled from cover to cover in finite, ballpoint-pen-written answers.

He's learned a lot of things over his visits: that Shiro foregoes breakfast but drinks a single mug of black coffee before he leaves for work. That Keith, despite his determined denial, is quite the cuddler and that he does, in fact, become very warm once he's been given the opportunity to collect body heat. That Shiro is ticklish (which had been an accident, Lance maintains to this day, before it had decidedly become not an accident anymore), and that Keith, often, spends his nights just eavesdropping on the people who occupy this town—distanced from them but feeling as though he's bonding vicariously through the interactions that they have with each other. Collecting them, in ways, through the brief glimpses of their lives that he's witnessed without their knowledge, and learning their habits and their lifestyles from the stores that they frequent and the restaurants where they eat and the people who they choose to greet and those who they ignore. He'd plotted out an entire mental web of the relationships that power this town. He'd noted once, when Lance mentioned Dr. Smythe in passing, that he often stopped by the flower shop at the end of the night, once the sun set and his office closed, and visited the woman who owned it. How Veronica met up with a girl with dark hair and makeup—Lance had stopped him there with a hand up and a sour expression, begging for him to talk about someone else. He'd recounted then, how Lance himself usually took the longer route home but lately he hadn't, and how Hunk always cooed and pet at his silly moped before he mounted it to leave the convenience store for the night, as though grooming some kind of mechanical horse that might actually respond to his undying affections with the devotion not to fail midway home.

He'd talked more during these conversations than he ever had about anything in the past, came alive when retelling the winding tales of the comings and goings of the town's population as though he'd watched them scurry like ants through a magnifying glass. He was brusque when he mentioned it, as he often is with most things, but his

dark eyes had ignited and his lips had tugged up at the corners to reveal the sharp pinpricks of his fangs, and Lance was reminded with a dull pang in his chest that Keith's only relationships with anyone outside of himself and Shiro were those fleeting encounters from a distance that he shared with unknowing participants.

Shiro told him later that it's harmless.

"He doesn't understand people, really," he'd spoken around the filter of his cigarette, blowing thick clouds of smoke into the frigid night air and watching the dark with a wistful distance in his eyes that told of many decades filled with experiences that Lance is now having for the first time, "When I was in college, there was a house centipede that used to crawl on my ceiling during the night. I tried killing it the first time, when I noticed it during a late-night cramming session. But it scurried away before I could reach it. For a month or so after, I'd see it sometimes, just crawling around. I started wondering what it was doing and where it went when it wasn't up there. If maybe it had a little centipede wife and kids waiting for it back in its hole. Maybe it had a centipede desk job to get to and the fastest route was over my ceiling.

I think Keith watches people like that too. He knows that he could squash them if he needed to, but he shouldn't. Maybe he doesn't really want to. Maybe he feels too sorry for them once the initial knee-jerk urge to kill the creepy-crawly goes away. There's a weird sense to that, knowing that you can kill something but waiting to see what it does first. That centipede left me alone so I let it be. Keith keeps his distance from humans until one of them makes themselves a problem. But I think he's lonely, too. I didn't want to befriend that centipede so I guess that's where the metaphor ends. But… Keith doesn't remember who he was before he was… this. He doesn't remember if he had parents or friends or if he was even a person before he was born or reborn. That's the most human thing about him: his need to be part of a community. And the one part of him that he can't ever appease because of everything else that makes him inhuman."

Lance knows that it has to be miserable existing like that, wanting more but being somehow even more disadvantaged than Shiro is. Shiro, at least, can form even shallow, fleeting and inconsequential relationships with other people. Shiro is able to socialize and spend his time creating a false identity for himself. Shiro wouldn't easily be picked from a crowd as an inhuman person, but Keith?

Lance knows that it would be impossible for Keith to ever make a

place for himself among the general public. It would be too dangerous and his life, already too limited, would be contained to only the night hours and the darkest reaches of any temporary home that they could find.

But maybe…

He hasn't been able to stop thinking about this potential new lead all day, hasn't been able to shake the feeling that perhaps this is crucial information that could cement his spot as a necessary asset to Shiro and Keith, and that maybe, if he plays his cards right, he can begin pulling his weight even this early in their relationships. He'll finish walking the last half-mile to the apartment complex, slip up the stairs and find the spare key that Shiro left for him, and once he's settled in and Shiro comes home and they get to talking, he can reveal that he's been sitting on this particularly juicy piece of information all this time.

He can imagine it now: Shiro's beautiful, dark eyes lighting up in excitement and his cheeks fanning with warm color in admiration of Lance's mental prowess. He'll grasp Lance by the shoulders and fall to his knees before him, and he'll be crying, too, maybe, thinking that he can't imagine anymore what it might have felt like to exist for so many years with that specifically Lance-shaped hole in his life, draining his energy and resources until Lance actually appeared to fill it. And Keith, tucked away in the dark corner or looming on the windowsill just as he considers crawling out into the shadowed apartment, will pause in astonishment, stilled by the crippling weight of his newly-sparked devotion to Lance, the genius, their savior, the one missing puzzle piece in their lives all along. He'll decide that it really was the best decision to show himself to Lance, that all the bumps along the road that led them here were worth it because truly —Lance is the golden-hued messiah that will lead them from ruin, the one human being in the entire lonely galaxy capable of heaving them from their despondent rutted existences and propelling them to reach for the stars.

They'll cheer for him and hold him and shower him in kisses and affection long into the night. And they'll fall asleep wrapped in each other as they often do these days. And they'll have Lance to thank for everything, when they finally set off in search of a new home beyond this town. When they find themselves finally situated in a place that can sustain them for longer than the measly span of a one-year lease. Life, from now on, will be easier just because Lance had the good instincts to actually do some research when he was offered a

particularly juicy piece of advice.

They don't have to know that Veronica was actually at the root of it. They don't have to find out that she was being sarcastic, poking fun at a hypothetical version of reality that had come so startlingly close to the truth that he still feels a little weird about it.

For all they have to know, Lance remembered it from a TV show that he watched years ago or an article that he read at work. Or maybe he'd just been so invested in all of this that he'd taken the initiative to skim through forum posts and travel blogs online in order to find a destination that would suit all of their needs.

The journey is less important than the destination in this case. He'll stay tight-lipped about the finer details. They'll be so bewildered by his intellect that they won't ask any questions about it anyway.

He's still mentally hyping himself up when he reaches the apartment complex. It's earlier than he's arrived here over the last few days, given that he's off tonight from his janitorial shift. Which is unfortunately awkward, he realizes only too late, since Shiro won't be off from the hospital for another few hours. Shiro showed him where he keeps his spare key hidden behind the tray that holds his apartment numbers, and he'd invited him to let himself in and relax until he, too, gets home. Which shouldn't have been the most tempting offer, given that Lance has a comfortable and well-decorated bedroom waiting for him back at his own apartment, but things have been so weird between him and Veronica lately that he isn't eager to risk walking in on another impromptu heart-to-heart or interrogation session just to enjoy the feeling of a real bed mounted on a frame above the floor or an apartment that's been heated all day and doesn't require at least an hour after turning up the thermostat to feel any less miserable than it does outside.

He can't be totally certain that Veronica isn't waiting up for him tonight, isn't sure if he's done or said anything else lately that might have landed him in even more hot water, so he decides not to risk it. He decides that until he needs to have that final, serious conversation with her before he leaves, he'll tiptoe just far enough beyond her reach that maybe they can finish planning without Lance accidentally letting slip any important information.

He doesn't like avoiding her, but he likes lying to her a lot less. And he definitely doesn't like the idea of accidentally waking her or the kids up when he needs to sneak out later on, and giving her just

another reason to be upset with him on top of everything else. He scrubs a hand through his hair, climbing the stairs carefully, mindful of the unsalted, slick steps and the hidden patches of ice in the black hallway. He lights his way with his phone's flashlight, fumbling awkwardly with the number plates when he reaches the door and eventually procuring the key from behind them, just as Shiro had reassured him that he could. The doorknob is stiff and yields in a slow, creaky grate of rust crammed in the joints. The door is heavy against the wind behind Lance as he wrenches it open. And he steps inside, locking up behind him. Shivering in the unheated apartment and the dark corner of the entryway, gazing into a solid wall of black and wondering if he's completely alone in here or not.

He doesn't feel a spike of fear when met with the realization that Keith might be silently watching him. He feels surprisingly at home the moment that he shrugs off his bag and coat and kicks off his shoes into the blind dark. He rubs his hands together, huffing in short breaths that he knows are probably hanging in invisible clouds in the shadows, and gropes along the wall before he remembers, just moments after pocketing it, that he can use his phone's flashlight to find the thermostat. Shiro thankfully agreed quite easily to allow Lance to turn up the heat and use the shower, and to eat any food that he'd stocked in the fridge. Lance had definitely made a point to ask, as he's been strictly engrained with the habit of never making himself too at home in someone else's house. He still remembers when he was a young kid and his mom would list off all of the faux pas not to make during sleepovers with the kids in his class, still remembers painfully the way that his grandmother would swat at his hand when he'd reached out to touch something that was too fragile to be trusted with a child.

He can feel their spirits breathing down his neck tonight.

He won't make a mess, he'll be good and courteous. He'd asked for permission to do everything that he's doing now, and he won't do anything beyond that. He'll wait around after he cleans himself up and distracts himself with more videos on his phone. And despite what a waste of electricity it is, he won't close the window across the room that's still blowing chilly gusts of winter air into the apartment, because he knows that Keith prefers to enter through there, as Lance is starting to wonder if he's just totally incapable of walking through a regular door.

He's brought his own mini-sleepover set in his book bag, consisting of shampoo and conditioner, lotion and skin cream, various odds and

ends that he suspects that Shiro doesn't keep stocked around here, a toothbrush, and a roll of toilet paper just in case. He'd also dug through his closet in search of his least embarrassing set of pajamas, settled on a dark navy set before switching out the matching shirt for a t-shirt with a faded band logo on the front of it instead.

The heat kicks on and Lance decides that he'll take a shower. Shiro told him this morning that he'd buy some snacks so Lance could eat here too. He wonders what Shiro picked out for him, but resists the urge to sneak into the kitchen and peruse the fridge. He needs to clean up before he snacks. He'll feel better once he takes a shower.

But he feels strangely well taken care of. He feels like he's a young teenager again, babysitting his neighbors' kids, trying to find the piece of paper in one of their end tables with the password for the DVR scrawled on it. Trying not to eat all of their rice cakes even though they reassured him that he could have anything that he wanted from the pantry.

There's just something strange about existing in another person's space without them there to guide him. Intimate, in a way, despite the emptiness of the apartment. It smells like Shiro in here, but there's an underlying stink of something old and rotten that might linger in the walls and carpet for decades after they leave. In the summers, when the temperature rises to a tepid seventy, the sun through the open windows might cook up the smell from the fibers and fill this whole space with the maceration stench that Shiro left behind. Cartilage and bone congealed in the pipes and blood caked in the corners of the sink drains. Skin cells scraped off from bodies dragged over the carpets, saliva and tears and the putrid rot of a human body decomposing in the bathtub, before Shiro manages to pry it out and shove it into a trash bag.

This apartment, well managed and so devoid of personality that it feels as though he's spending the night in the sample apartment kept empty near the landlord's offices, is underscored by a rising sense of wrongness that Lance hadn't taken the time to notice when he wasn't alone here. There's a dewiness to everything in here, a deep sense of fermentation that makes him feel like a hardboiled egg dropped in the bottom of a pickle jar. Like he'll be curdled with the rest of the interior if he stays inside for too long.

As though, with enough time spent sleeping here, he might carry the subtle smell of death with him everywhere that he goes.

Lance's stomach feels uneasy at the thought of it. He wonders if he should have brought air freshener as well.

He slips into the bathroom, flipping on the light overhead and pausing for a moment in confusion when it grows no brighter, when the firm wall of shadow in front of him remains still and unchanged. He cranes his head upward, squinting for a moment before turning on his flashlight again and beaming it up at the casing of the light. The bulb has been removed. He clicks his tongue. He should have known.

There's the slightest hint of light pouring in from the living room, from the small cracks between the adhesive on the windows and the edges of the frame, so he decides to keep the door open. It allows him enough illumination that he can move around without worrying about knocking into the counter or tripping over his clothes, and while it's definitely not optimal, he settles for it without much of a fit.

He sets down his phone and heads back to his bag, feeling around in it blindly and struggling to find what he needs with his fingers alone, before sighing hard, hoisting it up, and carrying the entire bag into the bathroom with him. He takes each item out one after another, sets them up on the sink and on the lip of the tub. His shower products stand alone there, absent of any shampoo or soaps that Shiro might use to clean himself or Keith. Lance knows that Shiro takes good care of himself and he's caught the faintest hints of fruity shampoo in Keith's hair from time to time. He isn't sure why or where Shiro puts his toiletries away, but he doesn't bother searching for them. He concentrates instead on unpacking his bag and sorting through each item in search of what he'll need right now.

There's no shower curtain, but he thinks that if he's careful, he should be able to manage this without getting too much water on the floor. He lays out the towel that he brought as well, just in case. Rolling it out along the seam of the tub, just where it meets the tile, in hopes of catching any rogue spray that bounds off of his body once he steps inside.

Tepid water sputters through the creaky pipes as he turns the knobs. It hits the tile, at first, in thick, hard drops, before eventually the streams lighten and the water warms up, and steam gradually begins to float up into the air and crawl slowly through the open bathroom door. He pulls his shirt over his head, unbuttoning his pants and stepping out of them, sliding his underwear down his legs and over the heels of his feet along with them, hooking a thumb under the mouth of each sock and discarding them on top of the pile. He isn't

sure if he feels like he's being watched now because he actually *is* being watched, or if maybe being naked in a dark and unfamiliar place would inspire the same paranoia in anyone. Even people, he thinks grumpily, who haven't insanely decided to share the rest of their lives with unholy monsters of the night that can seemingly appear and disappear out of thin air, without any real indication that they've come and gone at all.

The water is still lukewarm when he steps under the spray. He fiddles with the knobs until it feels just right, reaching over and grabbing a bottle and studying it closely to figure out if it's the shampoo, conditioner, or body wash. It's awkward bathing in the dark. He makes a mental note to bring over a candle or a nightlight or something bright enough to light his way next time that he spends time here. And if Keith gets mad about that, so be it! He's not the one who can't see his hand in front of his face or the bubbles foaming around the drain, or the bar of soap that's become one with the void now, that he struggles to grasp for a humiliating ten minutes before he finally bumps it with his fingers and knocks it aside, cursing loudly as it slides into the center of the tub between his feet.

Maybe he should have at least stopped back home to bathe. Maybe he should have cut his losses and just washed his face instead. But he's already invested in showering now, and he's nearly done. He rinses himself off, conditions his hair, and feels more relieved than he ever has to end a shower when he finally turns both knobs off.

He feels even tenser now than he did when he got off of work. He shakes his head, ignoring the dots of water that patter against the wall and the edge of the tub as they fly from the tips of his damp hair. He'll have to ask Shiro how he possibly manages to get ready in the morning in the dark. He'll have to figure out if there's some convenient trick that will make this whole routine a lot less of a hassle.

For now, he wrings his hair with fingers pinched at the base, squeezing dampness all the way along the shafts to the tips. He tousels it then, flicking wetness from his fingertips and shaking the water from his feet, easing out some of the aches from his sore muscles as he extends a leg over the mouth of the tub.

And only when he steps out onto his towel on the floor just outside of the shower, does he spot the darker line of a body silhouetted against the shadows in the bathroom doorway, perched there and watching him, unmoving and silent. Dark like ink spilled onto parchment, like a

black hole materialized in the threshold of the bathroom, eating away any essence of light.

If he'd thought that he'd become too jaded to be scared or startled anymore, he was absolutely wrong.

The sound that leaves his lips is so terrorized and high-pitched that it's barely even human, a frequency so severe that it might be better suited as a dog whistle. He nearly loses his footing as he reels back, isn't sure what part of himself to shield as adrenaline courses through his veins at rapid speed and muddies any reasonable thought that struggles to catch in his brain. He's stumbling and waving his arms and squawking incoherently and the black blob in the door jerks back.

"Lance!" It hisses in a familiar deadpan, "Jesus, calm down. It's me."

And *me* , of course, is the only creature in the whole universe that's bird-brained enough to sneak up on a guy while he's naked and not expect for him to freak out when he finally discovers that he's being watched. *Me* , is Keith, still and not breathing and Lance is sure, if there were any light to turn on in this bathroom so Lance could actually see him, he wouldn't even have the decency to look embarrassed right now.

Lance fumbles with apologies and accusations and scrambles to pull his towel from the floor while he's still standing on it. He finally manages to trip himself, at least, and barely catches himself before his skull cracks on the toilet seat. Arms steadied against the closed seat, legs wobbly and uneven and nearly buckling under him as he continues to fret over how best to cover himself, he jerks his head up to send Keith a fiery glare because every single part of this is definitely his fault.

He finally manages to wrap his towel around his waist, after much struggling and blind fumbling around, breathing labored and cheeks burning as he feels through the dark for the sink. Keith, with no discernable sense of personal space, doesn't ease back to give him clearance as he draws nearer. He seems to be watching Lance now with much interest as Lance ties the towel at his hip and uncaps the skin cream that he brought with him and left sitting on the counter. No apologies from Keith either. He discards the thought that he might deserve one as quickly as it bubbles up in his thoughts.

Damn Keith and his creepy inhumanness. His awkward unawareness of even the most basic forms of decency. Lance knows that if he were

to lecture him about privacy, he'd give him that same blank, bored expression that he's worn any other time that Lance has attempted to teach him a very valuable human lesson.

He bites off a scoff, deciding, instead, to focus his frustration on his nightly skin routine.

He dabs a conservative amount of skin cream on his cheeks and rubs it in, recaps the bottle and moves to the lotion before pausing, swallowing deeply, and deciding to put on deodorant first. He isn't particularly interested in stretching out and lathering himself up with an audience, no matter how seductive and sexy he always feels when he's doing it alone. He used to always tell himself privately that he could charm just about anyone if he were able to show them how flexible he can be—especially when putting lotion on those hard-to-reach places alone in the bathroom, especially when left in solitude and allowed to secretly admire the few things about his body that he'd always suspected were kind of attractive—but now it just feels a little bit too risque. And when he wonders how he'd feel if Shiro were here too, he quietly compartmentalizes the abrupt death of that pipedream and accepts the fact that perhaps he's just not destined to be a showstopper in any places but his own imagination.

Because now, he'd rather be torn apart and scattered along the gutter by the highway like Sendak than to emphasize just how many ways he can stretch himself out in front of Keith. He wonders if that's a mean comparison, wonders guiltily if he's already become so numb to the disgusting reality of their lives that he could possibly compare his embarrassment right now to whatever it was that Keith did to that officer.

It doesn't matter, but the thought of it sobers him enough that he can focus more fully on his routine without allowing his shyness to cloud his thoughts. He lathers some lotion on his arms, concentrating slow circles over his elbows and his wrists, mindful of the places where skin often cracks at the joints, wholly aware of how brutal the thin winter air can be on unguarded skin.

Keith reaches forward, resting testing fingers over the closed lid of his moisturizer, just as Lance is doing a very awkward job of trying to spread more lotion from his arms to his chest, to the rest of himself without bending down or reaching around himself in a way that might give Keith any extra peeks under his towel.

"Why do you put this on your face and the other stuff on your body?

It's all for skin, right?"

Lance purses his lips. It's not fair that Keith can be that pretty so effortlessly. Especially when Lance himself is forced to spend every evening and morning obsessively lathering on different lotions just to feel as though he isn't going to crack and flake away in this terrible, dry cold.

"The face stuff is made for… faces," Lance says dumbly, reaching forward and swiveling the moisturizer container around as though he might actually be able to read it in the dark, "It has collagen in it and stuff. It's supposed to be good for your skin's elasticity. Makes you look younger, you know?"

He isn't absolutely positive, given how black it is and the limited capacity that his eyes can adjust to said blackness, but he thinks that Keith might tense his jaw, might lower his brows in confusion as he grasps the moisturizer and pulls it closer to his face to inspect it. Lance takes advantage of this distraction and quickly swipes some lotion over the backs of his legs, around to his thighs, bending quickly and shallowly to rub some over his knees. Keith doesn't seem even remotely impressed with his small collection of skincare products, and he sets the moisturizer back down on the counter. He watches Lance then, as Lance stumbles over the humidity-slicked tiles and fumbles awkwardly with his bag, painfully aware of the cool air hitting the bare backs of his thighs as he bends further down. Keith's leaning against the doorframe, still staring unyieldingly when Lance glances back to look at him.

"That sounds complicated," he says brusquely. Lance laughs.

"Not everyone can be pretty like you, Keith."

Keith's still dressed in his usual long white t-shirt. Lance trains his eyes away from those naked, pale thighs and forces himself to continue digging through his bag for his pajamas. He can feel Keith drawing nearer behind him, dropping down next to him and peering into the bag curiously as Lance pushes aside a random assortment of things that he'd stuffed inside—an outfit for tomorrow and his janitor uniform, just in case. A few pairs of socks and his toothpaste, toothbrush, and floss tucked safely in a ziplock bag. Lance makes the mistake of turning his gaze in Keith's direction, startled at first, then captured fully in the dark recesses of his eyes only seconds later.

"You're also pretty," Keith tells him, "Your face… and your body…

they're both pretty."

Lance feels heat scoring from his cheeks to his ears, down his throat, and humming with a nervous popping in his chest. He's achingly aware of the small twinge of cold erecting his nipples, aware of the fact that his towel parts just between his legs and that in any way that matters, he isn't nearly as covered up as he'd feel comfortable being right now. But Keith's eyes stay focused on his face. His hands aren't nearly as frigid as Lance expects when he reaches forward and draws a slow and careful finger from the center of Lance's chest to the beginning of his abdomen. It drops off there, and Keith looks pleased with whatever he's found in that sensation. And curiously, he licks his lips, as though he might ask any moment now if Lance is willing to let him have another small meal.

Lance almost offers first, but Keith cuts him off.

"Can I kiss you again?"

And he nods, because of course Keith can, whenever he wants. Right now, so pretty and translucent and so close in the dark, he can do anything that he wants to Lance. He can keep touching him with those clammy hands. He can bury his teeth in his throat. And he can touch him gently and slowly with those chilly lips, as he's doing now, with soft hands framing his face and drawing him nearer. With dark eyes dropped closed and long lashes tickling Lance's cheeks when they meet.

Lance hums a small moan in the gap left between their mouths when Keith pulls back. He cracks open his eyes and breathes, long and shaken, reaching up with unsteady hands to brace Keith's wrists, to hold him in place and beg him silently not to end this so soon. Things are still stalled in the awkward beginning stages of their relationship. It doesn't come so naturally to any of them to kiss or touch or speak the tender words that Lance has felt singing inside of him for months now. Each clumsy step forward is agonizing and slow, and Lance cherishes these moments when things work out just fine. He wants nothing more than to spend the rest of the night kissing Keith in this bathroom, until Shiro comes home and joins them too. He wants nothing more than to exist in this bubble where tomorrow might never come, where they don't have to worry about leaving everything behind or running for their lives, finding more food for Keith or avoiding that awful detective's watchful eye.

He wants to be a friend who Keith can reach out and touch, and not

just a face watched from treetops miles away. He wants to be more than a story that Keith tells to Shiro later, and instead, a stationary fixture in both of their lives that they can learn to rely on. He wants Keith, now, and Shiro, when he finally comes home. He wants all of this to be forever. He never wants to leave this behind for a new morning ever again.

He bridges the gap between himself and Keith, kissing him again. His hands slip from Keith's wrists to his forearms, then his shoulders, dropping down to his waist and jerking in surprise when his fingers accidentally brush against the bare skin of his hips, where his shirt's hiked up while he's still crouched down.

"I—s-sorry—"

"It's okay. Touch me anywhere you want."

He swallows thickly. He really hopes that Keith doesn't risk a look downward, because now, successfully, he knows that he's pitched a pretty impressive tent in the front of the towel around his waist.

But they continue to kiss, and in moments, Lance grows bold enough to wander his curious fingers back downward, to make connection with skin. It's cold and smooth like the rest of Keith, but rounded and soft as Lance would have never expected just from seeing him from afar. Keith, too, allows his hands to drop from Lance's face, lingering for a long moment on his collar bones before slowly, agonizingly slowly, trailing downward, skimming over Lance's nipples in a way that makes him jerk and hiss quietly as he regretfully disconnects the kiss again.

"Are you ok—"

"Y-yeah, s-sorry, I wasn't… expecting that."

Keith furrows his brows but a small smile tugs up the corners of his lips. He seems to have figured out exactly what just happened from the hitch in Lance's breath and the dark color surely pooling his cheeks, and when he leans back in to kiss, curiously, his mouth dips down, away from Lance's, and settles instead just at the crook of his throat under his jaw.

Lance, for a moment, is riddled with nervousness, wondering if he should be afraid that Keith might bite him, might become so distracted by the smell of his blood and drumming of his pulse that he'll forget to be careful. But the teeth press and they drag over his

skin, but they never embed themselves with enough pressure to break through. He's mindful of Lance, gentle with him in ways that Lance knows must be agonizing for him. Tender when he probably doesn't have to be, when Lance knows with a shudder of shameful excitement that Keith could overpower him now and do anything that he wanted and Lance wouldn't have the ability to stop him.

It's a rehashing of a feeling that he'd had days ago, when Keith first drank his blood. This realization that he's in the tiger's teeth but it won't bite down just yet. He doesn't like to ask himself why the situation feels so intoxicating, why he finds himself enamored more with the risk of putting himself in this specific kind of danger when he knows that Keith is trying his hardest to be careful with him.

Lance wonders if he might be kind of a masochist. If maybe he just enjoys knowing that he's skirting at the fringes of a situation that could go terribly, terribly wrong if everyone involved isn't on their best behavior.

He doesn't know exactly how to explain it, how to feel about it, but he isn't given much time to mull over it now, either.

In seconds, there are far more distracting things going on with his body, and he regretfully tears his attention from the teeth at his throat to Keith, drawing short and jerky patterns over his naked thighs.

Lance swallows a groan, ignores the embarrassment currently swirling inside of him as he thinks about Keith's fingers potentially bumping the erection between said thighs that's prodded out into the chilly bathroom air. His towel has fallen from his waist, come undone as they've moved around, and Keith coaxes him gently to sit on his backside on top of it, instead of continuing to prop himself up on legs that have already begun to shake under his weight and his own anticipation.

He sits back without argument, bracing himself with arms wrapped around Keith, fingers pressed into the soft skin of his hips. And he's laid onto his back moments later, trembling in fear and excitement, in inexperience, wondering if it's really okay to let this happen when Shiro still isn't home yet, and when he's never even had a conversation with either of them about if Keith can even *have* sex, or —

He swallows thickly. Is this going to be sex? Is Keith willing to go that far with him tonight?

Is that okay?

Keith is tender as he kisses, first, at Lance's cheek, then back down to his throat, and pauses only when he travels to the top of Lance's chest, dithering for a moment as though he's unsure of what he should do, before turning his eyes up to Lance and dropping his brows, puffing out his lips and asking, "Are you alright with this?"

Lance almost laughs, because it's so obvious that at some point, Shiro has pulled him to the side and talked to him about consent. There must have been a time, years and years ago, when the two of them chased want and sensation and cared little about the repercussions, and while Lance appreciates it—while he knows undoubtedly that his own inexperience was probably spoken in volumes in the clumsy way that he touched Shiro a couple of weeks ago—he can't deny that he still wants anything that Keith is willing to give him tonight.

He nods once, jerky and uneven and awkward with his head against the tile.

Then he finds the croaky remnants of his voice, turning his eyes to the dark ceiling as mortification slowly ebbs in.

"I—I want this. It's okay."

This seems to be good enough for Keith, who continues roving over his skin only a short pause later. The heat around them suddenly feels entirely too high, and even Keith's fingers, careful on his skin, feel like torches setting fire to every part of him that they touch. Keith's teeth drag over the skin that his lips pause over, and there's a unique absence of breathing or sound, or any pulse caught between them and concentrated now that they're pressed so close. Lance almost feels as though he's being touched by a phantom, worked into a pile of incoherent goo by nothing but his own imagination. It reminds him, embarrassingly, of when he was younger and he'd wake up at the head of a wet dream, wondering what in the world could have happened to push him over the edge and make a mess of his pajamas and sheets while he was asleep.

But soon, Keith's climbed all the way down to his hips, flicking his eyes up once again to meet Lance's and smiling in a devilish, cocky way that Lance has never seen from him before, but something altogether so invigorating that Lance moans despite not even being touched yet. Keith presses a few lazy kisses to each hip bone. His hands slide languidly over Lance's naked thighs. And his eyes drop

downward, watching the way that Lance's erection reaches up through the dark between them desperately, and Lance tips his head away, screws his eyes shut. He hates how embarrassed he feels now, but he's never taken the opportunity to imagine how it might feel to be seen like this by someone and *something* like Keith. How it might feel to be on the receiving end of that scrutiny, from a creature old enough to have lived his lifetime multiple times over, who must have seen beauty and decay overlapping over centuries, and surely knows that Lance could never offer him anything more profound than he's already seen before.

But Keith leans in again, rests his cheek against Lance's thigh and pecks a short kiss there.

"You're very pretty," he says softly, "especially from this angle."

Lance chokes. His skin feels scalding enough to melt straight through the tiles underneath his towel.

He pushes himself up on his elbows, coughing on every assertion that he suddenly very desperately needs to make, but he doesn't close his legs and he doesn't pry himself away, and Keith watches him with a lazy half-smile that he can barely make out in the dark.

"K-Keith, that's—"

"It's true."

He shakes his head, sputtering for a moment before covering his face with his hand, breathing long and low, and dropping himself carefully back down to the floor.

"That's embarrassing," he offers weakly. He can hear Keith breathe something that must be a laugh from between his legs.

"But it's still true."

He darts his eyes away, clasping his hand tighter to cover his molten cheeks and willing down the incessant pounding of his heart. Keith presses his lips lightly into Lance's thighs, grasping at his skin so gently and still so unmoving and quiet that Lance barely feels as though there's another presence with him at all. He's dreadfully hard, terribly in need of some sort of friction before he becomes so desperate that he bucks up towards Keith, and he doesn't have faith in himself not to do so, not to do something embarrassing that Keith might not allow him to forget about for many years to come.

But Keith is slow and surprisingly practiced and tender as he kisses downward, as he parts Lance's legs further, as Lance feels the cold pinpricks of his eyes settled over his skin and still refuses to look downward, before the cool wet of something hints at the head of his cock and sends a skitter of nervous energy striking up his spine.

He doesn't have any experience with this sort of thing. The other day, with Shiro, was the furthest that he's ever gone before.

No one has ever put their mouth on him like this or teased him with the pointed tip of their tongue. No one has drawn close enough to see every embarrassing detail of his naked body and they've never spoken to him with the soft words that Keith offers to coax him more comfortably into this *thing* that Lance knows is coming sooner than it isn't.

And it's a strange sensation, when Keith finally pushes his lips over Lance's cock and takes him further into the back of his throat. It's wetter and tighter than he might have assumed from the porn videos that he's watched with the volume turned all the way down on his phone in his bedroom when everyone else is asleep. He'd always fantasized about being on the receiving end of a blowjob someday, as most sexual young men his age have, he's sure, but he never could have thought that it would be on the bathroom floor in his boyfriends' apartment, between the dangerously sharp fangs of a monster that could shred him into ribbons if it so felt inspired enough to.

Lance bites his lip, shudders and wills down many noises that bubble up inside of him. Keith doesn't breathe and he doesn't struggle to grow acclimated to the girth of Lance in his throat as the actors sometimes do in the pornos. He makes little noise and offers minimal movement, but the feeling of him—tight, wet, touching Lance at all—is enough that Lance can't summon the proper coherent thought to describe it.

There's a wet squelching, Lance's caged murmurs, the front door lock clicking as the knob turns. Lance's gummy brain does little to remind him why the sound of the door sliding against the carpet and two heavy footfalls stepping inside might not be the best thing to hear in his current position.

The realization comes belatedly, but severe and quick in a rush of sudden cold terror slicing through Lance's chest. He jerks upward, head dizzy and eyes wide and blind as he reaches down and awkwardly pats his hand in Keith's fluffy hair as though to catch his

attention. Keith keeps going, doesn't falter and holds Lance's thighs apart, anchoring him down even as Shiro calls out both of their names.

"Are you guys here?" Lance wants to die. It feels so good. He's naked. Shiro is home. He's going to see this. He's going to walk right in here and see Lance unfolded on his bathroom floor and Keith tucked contentedly between his legs. "Is that you in the bathroom? Lance? What's—"

And suddenly, his voice draws nearer before it's abruptly cut off. For a critical moment, Keith's wet sounds between Lance's legs are the only thing filling the silence. It's an aching stretch of mortification that Lance spends staring dumbfounded up at Shiro's black silhouette against the shadows of the living room, a tortured drag of time that the two of them watch each other and Lance can't look away while Shiro, frozen still, seems to struggle to find the right words to say. His bag drops to the floor next to him with an audible thunk. There's a long, wavered breath twined out in the quiet, and finally, Keith pulls his lips from Lance with a crude pop, and turns to square Shiro with an expression that Lance can't read in the dark.

"Welcome home," Keith tells him, "Come join us."

Shiro's resounding laughter is weighted with an emotion that Lance isn't coherent enough right now to pinpoint. But he shrugs off his coat and kicks off his shoes, and he's inching into the bathroom that's barely big enough for the three of them sooner than Lance's muddy thoughts can piece together what's just happened.

"Did he ambush you?" Shiro is close to his ear now, easing his hand behind Lance's head, just between his shoulders, as though he might help him lie down fully again. "He gets in moods like this sometimes. Too impatient to even let you get dressed or find the bed before he's attacking you."

"I'm right here," Keith hisses. He's crouched down with fingers prodding open Lance's legs again.

Lance murmurs some reassurance that he isn't even totally confident are real words, but Shiro nods anyway. He laughs again, arching downward and planting a soft kiss just at the edge of Lance's hairline. Lance tips his head up, turning and pressing his lips to Shiro's, catching him off guard. But Shiro relents a moment later, kissing back, grasping firmer around Lance's shoulders now and easing him upward

enough that they can continue uninhibited. Lance notes the way that Keith pauses between his legs, how his hair tickles his thighs as though he's turned his eyes up to watch them. He's unyielding and unmoving as always, and through the murkiness of his mind now, he can't help but wonder exactly what Keith sees. If he enjoys the sight of them or if he's jealous, or if he's just trying to figure out how he might be able to wedge himself between them and get in on the action as well.

Shiro's lips wander to the edge of his, then to his jaw, down his throat. This is when Keith seems to snap out of his trance, easing forward enough that Lance can feel the slide of that smooth skin over his own heated body, and the edges of that t-shirt resting over his belly as Keith tugs at Shiro, urging him over Lance so the two of them can kiss as well. And he has to admit, from down here, gazing up at them, it isn't a bad sight at all. He's never seen them kiss each other like this before, but he could get used to it, feels his arousal nearly double as he imagines what it might be like to watch them touch each other too.

But he decides that he needs to busy himself, reaches up and runs a hand over the smooth expanse of Keith's thigh rested against his side. Their current position isn't the most comfortable—Keith and Shiro facing one another one their knees, Lance sitting up now, propped between them—but he finds that he doesn't mind too much when his face is level with Keith's belly and his hands are given access to Keith's exposed skin. Keith doesn't move, doesn't give much of an indication that he even notices that he's being touched, but Lance still finds that he isn't quite brave enough to sneak his fingers under the fabric of the t-shirt either. It's short enough that as his hands rove from the dip of Keith's knee to the back of his thigh, that he jolts upon reaching the rounded edges of the bottom of Keith's backside, face scorched and pulse pounding in his veins as he spares a guilty look up at Keith, who's now busying himself with getting Shiro undressed and kissing every exposed piece of his skin, as though Keith might stop working just to chastise him for being a pervert.

But no such thing happens, of course, and Lance finds himself reassured and marginally more confident, and he also finds that it's difficult to tear his fingers away from Keith's ass now that they're allowed to be there. He turns slightly over to his side, angling himself so that both hands have easier access to Keith's body and finally, slowly, tugging up the edges of Keith's shirt as his other hand continues to explore.

He's surprised, when Keith's bottom half is exposed, to find that

there's an erection bobbing in the dark air. In the shadows, it's hard to make out more of it than the darker black silhouette of it against the inkinesss of the room, but he's only fleetingly allowed himself to consider that Keith is capable of becoming aroused like this, and relieved, too, when he realizes exactly what this means.

He doesn't waste a lot of time before he shuffles closer, positions himself on his knees and crouches down, nearly on all fours in front of Keith. He presses the front of Keith's shirt high up in the center of his belly as his lips clumsily and blindly seek out the head of that dark mass just between Keith's legs. It's cooler than Lance thinks that a human's might be—than his or even Shiro's have felt in his hands before—but it's smooth and tasteless and strangely pleasant to feel on the flat bed of his tongue. At the feeling of this, Keith finally moves, jerks back and pulls away from Shiro to peer down at Lance between his bent knees, and his fingers fall to comb through Lance's hair and push it from his face—to make things easier, maybe, or just to get a better view.

Lance doesn't even have Keith at the back of his throat before he feels embarrassment pool him. He can't bring himself to meet Keith's eyes, or to regret the fact that in his current position, Shiro has a front row, close up view of his ass, or to address even mentally that Shiro is laughing at him when the sound leaves him, and that there's a strange, anxious sensation rested over all of them now, which he suspects might be Keith's own embarrassment infecting the dark air.

"He's eager, isn't he?"

Lance's cheeks burn, and Keith eases down, slow and careful with a hand steadied against the side of Lance's head as he slowly pulls himself from Lance's mouth and settles on his backside on the floor. Lance shudders a breath, catching Keith's black eyes in the dark and drawing the back of his hand over his lips to wipe the mess from them. He swallows then, eyes trapped with Keith's, trembling in anticipation as Keith coaxes him forward and spreads his thighs wider, exposing his still-hard erection in an invitation for Lance to touch him again.

And Lance does, even as he feels the cool of Shiro's hand resting against his backside, now prostrated higher in the air. Drinking in the sound of the soft noise that Keith offers him as his lips slide over the head tentatively, as his hand encircles the base and he attempts a slow imitation of all of the people that he's watched doing this in porn before.

Keith isn't nearly as big as Shiro had been, and he doesn't move around or offer a staggered breath or any substantial sounds to indicate that it feels good. But Lance pulls back his head and pushes forward, hollows his cheeks and drags a tongue along the underside. He tells himself that he's doing fine. Keith would stop him if it didn't feel good. He'd say something if he were doing a bad job.

When he flicks his gaze upward once again, he's overcome with a steadying sense that everything is going exactly as it needs to, when he catches Keith's blown out pupils still focused intensely on his face and his hand and the way that he works Keith between them sloppily and too slowly to surely feel as good as it should, but better than he might have assumed that he'd do under these circumstances when he's allowed himself to fantasize about it.

And he's jolted, once again, when he feels something hot and wet prod between his cheeks. He doesn't snap his head back to look at it, doesn't cry out or yell at Shiro to leave him alone. He doesn't mind the feeling of Shiro's big hand spreading one of his cheeks apart and definitely can't complain about the feeling of his mouth working over him back there. And he can't swallow his embarrassment properly with Keith's cock in his throat, so he tells himself that he'll focus on this instead. On the feeling of himself propped between them and of Keith's brief twitches when he pulls off before plunging back in. On the way that Shiro's tongue catches him in just the right place, and sends a score of white-hot want fanning out from his belly and twitching along the body of his weeping cock, needy and already missing the sensation of Keith's wet mouth around it.

They stay like this, for a moment, until Lance swallows Keith down his throat and thankfully eases off before he gags. When Shiro pulls away and asks Keith if they have any lubricant in the apartment.

And Lance, embarrassingly, removes Keith from his lips and cranes his head back, and in a jumpy voice that's knocked down a few octaves, rugged and tired from a sore throat, he pushes out, "I-I brought some, uh, in a bottle in my bag."

Keith muffles a laugh. Even in the dark, Lance can clearly make out Shiro's surprised half-smile.

"You really *were* eager, weren't you?"

He turns his attention back to Keith, but listens with much mortification as Shiro shoves up from the floor and pads over to his

bag, ruffling through it until he apparently finds the bottle that he was looking for.

He feels the displacements of air behind him and the warmth of Shiro's body filling the absence that he briefly left behind as he plops down quietly behind Lance and situates himself again. Keith is combing his fingers through Lance's hair, still silent and barely moving, but hitching periodically, in a way that Lance starts to memorize as he does specific things at specific moments, as he touches Keith at differing angles and sucks in his cheeks at random intervals. He realizes with a rush of pride that he's actually managing to make this feel good for Keith more than he's just making his own jaw tired.

He tries not to think about the way that he raises his hips higher when Shiro asks, "Is this okay, Lance?"

Or the affirmation that rises as a hum in his throat, but that births something new and beautiful as well: a soft gasp from Keith, a rivet of movement shuddered through him, and testingly, Lance hums again, feeling the vibration of his voice ricocheting around Keith in his mouth, and barely able to stop himself from pulling back and cheering when Keith's head drops lazily to the side, and he puffs out another soft noise.

Shiro notices too, pauses with a slick finger prodded just between Lance's cheeks.

"He's doing a good job?"

Keith shudders a manufactured breath, as though Lance is somehow making him feel so good now that he's chasing the inhumanity out of him.

"O-oh, yeah… G-god, yeah."

Lance isn't absolutely certain if it's a good thing or not that his sense of self-worth is so intrinsically tied to the way that those words leave Keith's mouth, or the fact that even Shiro seems impressed with him, or that somehow he's gotten himself into a position where he's actually sexually appealing to the two most beautiful creatures that he's ever witnessed in his entire miserable life in sunless, snowy Hell-on-Earth, Colorado, but he allows himself to be proud nonetheless. To show off just a little by pumping Keith deeper into his throat at a faster pace, and moaning, too, as Shiro dips a finger inside of him that feels admittedly better than he'd ever thought that something like that could.

Definitely nicer than the guilty, forbidden moments when he's found himself alone and curiously explored these sensations himself. Definitely more exciting, when he thinks about the implications of Shiro's hands working him back there, and Keith underneath him, and wherever these endeavors will lead them in a few short moments, when all three of them are ready to go.

Which inspires him, and reminds him, and becomes the only thing actually capable of removing him from Keith's cock again just so he can ease higher up on his elbows and turn his head to catch Shiro's eyes on the other side of his body.

"H-hey," he says quietly, messily, already halfway out of it when Shiro's only got a single finger hooked inside of him, "D—do you still have, uh, th-the lube? So… so I can, uh… Keith?"

It's a word salad that makes less sense outside of his head than it made inside of it, but Shiro smiles in understanding nonetheless. Keith offers no argument as Shiro grasps the bottle and passes it between them, or even when Lance uncaps it and drizzles a sizable amount over his fingers, re-capping it and setting it down somewhere off to the side, in the blackness where it sits forgotten for the rest of the night.

He teases the head of Keith's cock with his lips as a sole slick finger prods just between his cheeks. Keith leans back and removes his fingers from Lance's hair. He steadies himself against both hands behind him, spreading his legs further apart, as though excited for exactly what Lance plans to do to him now. The way that he's watching Lance, with glassy eyes and blunted front teeth worrying his bottom lip, how his fangs twinkle weakly in the dim darkness and his shirt clings high up on his non-expanding chest, Lance watches him and drinks in the sight of his low, thick brows drawing close together when the first finger makes its way inside. Tighter than Lance was expecting and still warm in the dewy bathroom around them. He wonders if Keith knows how beautiful he is, too, from this angle, as he'd told Lance earlier, but from any angle that Lance could possibly conceive of. He can't tell him this because the words get caught in his throat, his mouth is busy, Shiro has slipped another finger inside of him, from behind. But his heart thrums with the feeling of it, with an overpour of affection and love and devotion, and the striking realization after every hardship piled up on top of them, that he couldn't have made a better choice for himself than to decide with certainty that he'd follow them wherever they choose to go after this.

Keith watches him in the dark with skin that nearly shimmers, translucent and pearly against a backdrop of solid black. His hands are still somewhat warm as his fingers sneak back into Lance's hair, cradling his ear with ghost-light touches that hum vibrations over Lance's skin. And his small noises fill the empty air, mingle with Shiro's deep breathing and Lance's small moans as the three of them continue to touch each other for a short period of time that Lance wishes might last forever.

Shiro moves his fingers around, pressing lightly into a spot inside of Lance that arches his back and skitters pleasure from his warm knotted belly over the damp expanse of him. His eyes flutter closed and he takes Keith far back in his throat, his jaw aching in the best way, his elbows numb where they rest against the unyielding tile of the floor.

"Lance," Shiro says softly, more of a hum in the air than words that Lance's molasses brain can catch before they dissipate, "Is… is it okay if I…"

Lance presses his ass higher in the air, entirely too consumed in this experience to even feel the shame from it anymore. Shiro bites off a breathy laugh, removing his fingers achingly slow and allowing his hand to wander instead to Lance's cheek, spreading it apart and seeming to take an extended amount of time that scores heat ever-hotter through Lance's insides to inspect whatever's caught his attention back there.

Maybe he's just enjoying the view. Lance, as embarrassed as he feels now, can't say that he blames him, if it feels even an ounce as amazing as being allowed to see Keith in all of his naked glory now. Spread out and clearly eager as Lance dips another finger inside of him and pulls back his head, drawing the flat of his tongue over the underside of Keith's cock.

Lance's breath catches in his throat as he feels the warm mass of Shiro's body drawing up from the floor behind him and hears the wet sounds of Shiro doing something to himself, before the press of something firm and hot prods just between his cheeks. Shiro's big hand spreads him again. Before he can even regain his bearings, before he can even take Keith deeper in his mouth or add another finger, or do anything that might distract him from the feeling of Shiro prodding into him, he feels the push of the head testing him. Feels himself wracked with a needy shiver as another long moan rattles through his throat. Keith jerks and grasps at his hair tighter.

Shiro shudders a laugh and apologizes, telling Lance that he's trying to take it slow.

And Lance wishes that he were coherent enough, or that his mouth were free enough, to tell him with certainty that he absolutely should feel free to go as quickly as possible. Lance might not be as experienced as the two of them are, but he likes to think that he makes up for that in eagerness. In the willingness to do anything and have anything done to him tonight, if only they're here to join him.

His fingers shake as he scissors them out, as his damp and swollen lips work over Keith's shaft and Keith drags in another breath. Lance knows that his breathing now exists more to emphasize the pleasure that he's feeling than out of necessity. It's a little flattering, even though he doesn't have the capacity right now to voice that, or to feel it as properly as he might later, when he reminisces this scene while he's alone with his thoughts. It's funny, almost, of all the times that he's imagined doing this sort of thing with both of them, that he never would have expected for Shiro to be so impatient or for Keith to be so vocal, especially when Lance is more than aware of the fact that he probably doesn't have to be. He'd still enjoy this just as much if Keith were weird about it. He's thought about it often, wondered how he'd react if he were to touch Keith and Keith weren't capable of giving him any indication that it feels good.

He's always thought that he'd be a good sport about it. He'd remind himself that Keith isn't required to present himself as more human just to be worthy of love and affection.

But in this moment now, faced with the realization that Keith only humanizes when under this kind of pressure…

It's undeniably sexy. Sexy in a way that he never would have imagined had he not been faced with it right now.

He wonders where Keith learned that humans often make noise under these circumstances. The idea that maybe he learned it from fucking Shiro, too, only makes Lance's neglected erection throb with more monumental need.

Shiro presses further in, uncomfortable for a short amount of time that has Lance drawing his brows close together, stilling the sharp intake of breath in his lungs, and resisting the urge to lock his jaw as he feels that maybe Keith wouldn't appreciate. But it's hard to move for a moment, as he eases into the sensation of Shiro's girth filling him.

He'd always thought that this would be easier, and now he's not quite sure why he'd fooled himself into believing that. Why he'd thought, once upon a time, that Shiro's thick cock, that he'd even grasped and held in his hand, marveling at the sheer size of it, wouldn't feel even remotely strange when sliding gradually into a part of him that's never been filled by more than his own exploring fingers in the past.

But it doesn't hurt, not really. It's a strange sensation washed quickly into pleasure as he grows more acclimated to being filled. As Shiro draws in deeply enough that he can feel the brush of his head against that spot inside of Lance that scores more warmth into his belly. When Lance feels the brush of hair trailed from his navel further down meeting the skin of his backside, he allows himself to exhale. And they're still for a long moment as Lance remembers to move his fingers and his mouth, as Keith watches him with calculating intensity, fingers paused in his hair.

"Are you okay?"

Shiro's voice is even and low. Hoarse in a way that only makes Lance's cock harder. Between his legs, he can feel a single hot strand of precum dripping from the head. He breathes in and out deeply, tugging himself back from Keith's cock and giving it a few lazy strokes with his shaking hand.

"Y-yeah," he says breathlessly, "Y-you're big, but… feels good."

Shiro's winded laughter is emphasized by his large, warm hand sliding flat-palmed from Lance's cheek and his body caving in slightly to angle himself right enough to snake his fingers between Lance's legs. He gives a few testing strokes over Lance's cock, shuddering a breath as Lance finds himself caught in his half-arch against Shiro's back, his movement angling Shiro in just the right way inside of him that it feels especially nice.

He groans again. Keith's fingers push his sweaty, shower-damp hair from his face.

And Shiro moves, gradually. He pulls out slowly and halfway and pushes carefully back inside. A warble of sound catches in Lance's throat. His strokes along Keith's shaft grow uneven and messy, but Keith doesn't complain or reprimand him. Lance can't feel those eyes on him now, and when he finds the strength to look up, he finds that Keith is watching Shiro closely. Lance doesn't have the coherency right now to wonder about it, to think about what Keith might be

watching for, what might be going through his thoughts. But it's hard not to stare at Keith for too long, because his eyes, caught with such dedication on Shiro's face, are softer now than Lance has seen them since he first met him. He's still twitching as Lance's fingers work inside of him, as his hand sloppily strokes him, still distracted somewhat by the things that Lance is making him feel, but there's a tenderness to him, too. As though Lance has peered into a private moment between the two of them. As though Keith is seeing Shiro for the first time in a long time, and he's missed him all along.

Lance swallows thickly. He shoves up from the floor carefully, catching Keith's attention and regretting it guiltily when that softness flicks away. But he decides that he'd rather move this along before Shiro's slow movements behind him draw him too close to the edge and Keith is left tonight without the specific kind of pleasure that Lance's fingers have promised him.

Keith looks to him quietly, pensively, and Shiro's hand draws away from between his legs. He seems to understand what Lance is intending now before Keith's thoughts catch up, so Lance swallows his embarrassment and pats the floor in front of him, saying finally, rough and low and shaky, "U-uh, do… do you want to, um, get… under me?"

Keith's brows bow and a small smile spreads over the flat line of his lips. He looks as though he might laugh for a moment, but he shakes his head, moving languidly with a grace that's almost too fluid to ease himself under Lance's lifted arm, between his legs missionary style, with his thighs spread out and his dark eyes peering up through the shadows to settle on Lance's hot face.

Lance is caught off-guard for a moment, erection resting warm and needy against Keith's thigh. Keith's legs open. His fingers are poised on Lance's arms to brace himself as they watch each other in the dark. Shiro, behind Lance, has paused in waiting as well, leaned in closer as he presses gentle kisses against Lance's shoulders as though to coax him along. Even Keith doesn't seem nearly as impatient now as Lance might have expected when he'd guiltily fantasized about this kind of thing in the past. Keith's lips are cracked open, and Lance can barely make out the sharp tips of his fangs peeking through. He can see the shadowed reflection of himself refracted in shadow and beamed back at him, deep in the hollow depth of Keith's dark eyes. He doesn't see a coward dithering now, doesn't see an idiot in way over his head.

He sees, for a moment, just what Keith might see, too: a boy who

loves him deeply, who's frozen in anticipation for a moment that's finally come, drawn out longer because he's stalled in his own nervous astonishment that he even managed to get this far. Because inside of him, his heart's been overfilled. Leaked over in the form of a curious wetness clinging to his lashes, feeling Shiro's soft skin against his back, the sensation of him inside, Keith between his legs staring up at him, waiting patiently as Lance finds himself so caught up in this moment that he feels that he might cry.

But he regains his bearings eventually, and he jerks back to attention, apologizing in a soft and bashful way that makes Keith's eyebrows drop and draw close together, but otherwise goes unmentioned. Even Shiro waiting quietly behind him doesn't urge him forward with more than another gentle press of a kiss against the back of his shoulder. Lance swallows thickly, shaking his head to rid it of any intrusive thoughts and reaches a shaky hand between his legs to wipe the remaining lube onto his still-eager erection. Keith's dark eyes follow his movement, and he resists the urge to cover himself. Inside, behind him, he can still feel Shiro, hard and warm and dreadfully gentle as he waits blindly for some kind of verbal or physical cue that he can start moving again.

It's awkward to situate with the two of them connected, and Lance has a feeling that they probably look ridiculous from afar. No one ever warned him about how embarrassing sex could be, and he wonders if this is the norm, or if perhaps he's just such a substantially humiliating person in general that he's failed to make this nearly as sexy and fluid as it could be in more capable hands.

But he does eventually find himself positioned correctly, with the head of his cock pressed between Keith's cheeks and his heart hammering in his throat, and Keith still watching him blankly, unmoving, as though suddenly he's turned to stone. Keith's fingers touch him tighter now, in anticipation, maybe, and the feeling of that subtle ache is enough to rattle him fully out of his thoughts. He almost asks if Keith is ready, but the words garble in his throat. Keith nods anyway, pushes himself back onto Lance to the best of his ability at such a limited angle. He seems to be growing impatient now, after everything. After all of the waiting around and quiet understanding. Lance wonders if they've just come so far at this point that there's really no going back.

He doubts that. Somehow, even through the fog of his arousal and the confusion of his embarrassment, he has a feeling that both of them would allow him to untangle himself from between them and go home

even now, if he so desperately needed to.

So he pushes in gently, carefully, and Keith's brows are tight, his jaw hard, his eyes slipped closed as Lance gasps at the feeling of suddenly meeting tightness. It's indescribable, unlike anything that he's felt before. He drops forward and draws Keith tighter in his arms. Keith's hands travel to rest on his back, his legs tucked up against Lance's sides. Shiro falls forward with him and buries deeper inside, angled differently now. Positioned in a way inside of him that feels too good to ignore. And the movement, slowly, picks up again.

Lance, drawn as though by puppet strings and pushed back into Shiro, compelled forward, shoved so irrevocably into the throes of pleasure that he can barely keep up with himself anymore. Keith's lips on his lips and his cold hands in his hair, and Shiro behind him, inside of him, with a mouth that's warm on his shoulders, on the crook of his spine, all around him. These men are all-consuming and they've everything right now. Keith is soft and quiet and Shiro is gentle and warm. And they're touching him as they've wanted to touch him. As he's wanted for so long to find himself touching them.

He fumbles clumsily to grasp Keith's cock between them, but finds Keith's smooth hand already working over himself. Finds himself keening a groan deep in the back of his throat at the thought of it, regretful that he doesn't have the reach or the night vision right now to peer between them and witness how Keith's touching himself more clearly. But it feels too good, being caught between them. Any coherent thought that he might have had moments ago floats promptly from his head and dissipates into the humid, dark air.

Shiro continues to bump against his backside, slide himself to the sheath and successfully stroke against that same spot inside of Lance that springs an almost too-concentrated amount of pleasure through his belly. Keith, around him, is soft and warm and tight. And he can't stop himself from staring at the twin glints of those teeth in the dark, the way that Keith's thick lashes fall over his black eyes, how his jaw tenses and his lips drop open, and he allows himself to express a short series of quiet noises that Lance is aware enough, at least, to understand that he probably wouldn't be allowed to hear if he weren't incredibly special.

He's drawn dangerously close.

He buries his face into Keith's neck, lips pressed against the shell of Keith's ear. His hips hitch and his knees shake, and he'll deny that he

said anything later, if either of them ask. He'll refuse to address the warble of his voice or the breathless pitch of it or the way that he'd begged Keith in stilted, slurred words laced thickly with the dulcet moans that continue to bubble out of him and fill the small, cramped quiet of the bathroom.

"K-Keith, please—Keith, b—bite me, please—"

Keith hesitates, but Lance continues to thrust, continues to cry and beg pitifully and to prop up his hips just as Shiro pushes in, catching him just as his cock slides back inside, angling him in that perfect way that stars seem to materialize at the black backsides of Lance's eyes.

Keith's sharp teeth needle into the delicate flesh between his shoulder and his throat. Not hard enough to draw blood, careful and slow and timid, but aching at the surface of his skin all the same.

Shiro, behind him, groans long and low. His fingers press harder into Lance's hip. Keith trembles hard, Lance's drawn-out cry muffles against Keith's soft skin.

He's cumming before he can even catch himself.

The words that leave him are wet nonsense that sounds distant and blank in his ears. He's not sure what happens for a short moment as he comes down from the high of his orgasm, but soon Shiro is pulling out of him. He's being coaxed off of Keith. He's being held now, in arms both warm and clammy. Shiro kisses him at first, then Keith is kissing him just as his head clears.

And there's a short laugh, foreign, almost, when he realizes that he's never heard Keith laugh before.

"I wonder if the neighbors are gonna call the landlord and complain?"

Shiro is cleaning up. Lance almost argues, but his voice catches on the swell of emotion still solid in his throat.

It's a short night, after that, before he falls asleep.

Before Shiro spreads out the cot wider so all three of them can fit comfortably on top of it. Before Lance slips off to much-needed slumber, wrapped safely in the middle of both of them.

Before he awakens to the morning sun peeking through the cracked adhesive and realizes that neither of them rolled away or let him go at

any point during the long, cold night.

This could be his eternity, he thinks.

This could be forever.

If everything goes just right for the first time in his life, maybe, if he's lucky enough, he'll never have to let them go for very long ever again.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for sticking around for 200k words! <3

Chapter 24

Lance doesn't look up from his phone in his hands as he feels the merry-go-round wobble underneath him, accompanied by the sound of its joints groaning under the sudden added weight. He does scoot over, however, allowing a small amount of room next to him that Keith's bare legs slide through and dangle over the edge of the ride. His pale, bare feet prop in the snow as his hands grasp at the bars to steady himself. Lance smiles fondly, worrying the inside of his lip with his teeth and concentrating, still, on at the video that he's watching on his phone screen. He can feel the cold void of Keith's presence lurking near him now, seeming as though it's sucking all heat from his body. Those delicate hands stay wrapped around the handles of the merry-go-round, his feet disappear into the small piles of snow on the ground, and his dark eyes suddenly focus on the animation of a kitten scaring itself in the mirror that Hunk sent Lance just moments prior. There's a short moment then, in which both of them sit together and hone their attention on the sole glimmer of Lance's mobile screen in the dark. Keith, brows drawn low and lip jutting out in concentration, and Lance, biting his own lip to mask the coo of a laugh that threatens to leave him as he admires that poor kitten's baby claws spreading out to swat at its own reflection.

"It's like a tiny television," Keith says, his only greeting, but far more than Lance was expecting to hear from him. He laughs softly, finally turning his eyes upward to meet Keith's, suddenly finding it even harder not to express the sheer amount of cuteness that he's forced to witness as Keith continues staring at his phone with that tight, perplexed expression. He raises the phone just a little bit higher for Keith to inspect more closely. Keith leans in, the blue glow of it lighting up the stark slopes of his high cheekbones and shadowing the divot above his parted lips.

"It is," he says, "You can do a lot of stuff on phones these days."

Keith tugs it from Lance's grasp eagerly, distracted and wholly enamored as he turns it over in his hands, jolting just slightly when he presses the volume toggle accidentally and the kitten's whines and shrill meows ring out in the silent night air. He taps the screen a little bit harder than he needs to, but it does manage to pause the video. And he inspects that, too, lifting it close to his eyes and squinting down at the kitten's frightened face, blurred and distorted with pixel artifacts and cemented between the twin lines of the pause icon in the

center of the screen

“They didn’t look like this at first.”

Lance nods, lifting his legs and stretching them out, and dropping back his head to admire the wide blanket of stars overhead.

“Imagine how crazy they’ll be in another hundred years.”

The phone thumps quietly on the metal surface of the ride between them. Keith crosses his legs and tucks his hands into his lap, turning his head upward and piecing through the night to find whatever must be distracting Lance. They don’t exchange words for a long stretch of time, but it’s nice, sitting here, waiting for Shiro’s old car to lurch through the parking lot and spit him out after a long night at the hospital. They can finally relax together after that, for another fleeting evening after many long days spent infrequently meeting up two at a time whenever they’re available. Lance looks forward to spending long nights together like this forever, at some point very soon in the future. He looks forward to eternity being the three of them together and no longer kept distanced by politics or lies or the watchful eyes of some detective who currently can’t see him through the thick of the trees separating the park from her usual hiding spot.

Keith’s feet kick at half-melted snow. His fingers wander between them and lace with Lance’s, settled against the cold metal of the merry-go-round and zapping the remaining warmth from Lance’s hands almost immediately.

“Do you ever feel… insecure, Keith?” Lance asks, not quite sure where the words have come from, but knowing with certainty that they’ve been churning inside of him perhaps even for his entire life, just waiting for the right opportunity to ask another person if it’s possible that everyone feels these things with the same intensity that he always has, “You know, like… maybe things aren’t gonna work out because you don’t deserve it? Or you aren’t good enough? Or like… you’re an imposter and everyone thinks that you’re better than you are?”

Keith doesn’t respond for quite some time, and even when Lance cranes his neck to watch him, his hollow, black-hole eyes don’t stray from the sky. High above them, a satellite blips a sporadic series of red-hued twinkles against the endless, open dark. It’s like a star that hasn’t quite figured out how to fit in with the others, all bright red gases and inconsistency, maybe trying its hardest to camouflage itself among its more practiced peers but never managing to acclimate itself

perfectly. It's how Lance feels, and maybe Keith, too, like a person who never quite grasped how to be a person.

"I feel afraid sometimes," Keith tells him softly, "that you don't like it when I touch you because I'm too cold. Or that Shiro will finally get tired of this and leave me. Sometimes I wonder if I'm even worth the trouble, or if it would have been better if I'd let him die, but… It doesn't matter, does it? Regretting things doesn't change them. Being afraid that Shiro is going to leave isn't going to stop him from leaving, and I can't do anything about being cold if you don't try to warm me up first."

His thick brows are drawn low. His gaze, hard and focused but distant as though finding something important between the twinkle of the stars and that unfortunate blipping satellite, finally flicks from the sky overhead to the snow between his toes. His eyes are suddenly glassy, like clear varnish painted over the wide eyes of a doll, but Lance doesn't mention it.

"I think all that matters is that I love Shiro and I love you. And I try to be better because of that."

Lance swallows thickly. Without meaning to, his grip around Keith's frigid fingers tightens. His pulse wavers and he's shivering under his coat. The words in his throat lodge up for a moment before tumbling out, and his skin, alight with heat, feels so radiant that maybe it'll warm Keith up within seconds flat, just because he's close enough to be melted by it.

"O-oh, I, uh… I love you too."

Keith offers him a rare half-smile, conjures a breath just to spit a small laugh and turns his face away.

"I know you do," he says, "Humans are so funny about saying how they feel, even when it's obvious."

Lance doesn't know why he laughs instead of being rightfully offended, or why he lets that statement settle before fading into a comfortable silence. He doesn't know when he got so used to this that he doesn't even jump or shirk away when Shiro's car finally clatters over the hump at the threshold of the parking lot and lurches into its regular parking spot. Why he doesn't feel embarrassed that he's been caught in the act of tenderness with Keith, or feels as though he's somehow cheating on Shiro in a relationship that's been the three of them from the beginning. Or why he finds himself so lulled into

contentment by the mere idea that Shiro will come over to them once he turns off his car that he feels no ache of uncertainty or insecurity when Shiro climbs from the driver's seat and offers him a sluggish wave and that sleepy, handsome smile.

Lance continues to hold Keith's hand as Shiro trudges through the snow towards them. He smiles warmly as Shiro draws close enough to slide a hand to Keith's cheek and urges him upward into a welcoming kiss. And Lance feels excited and giddy when Shiro turns to him and does the same, reaches up to tangle his fingers momentarily in the short brush of Shiro's closely-cropped hair and drops his eyes closed to enjoy the feeling of it.

This feeling that he can describe as nothing else but being exactly where he's supposed to be.

"You guys look nice out here," Shiro greets with a laugh as he pulls away, "Like a Christmas card."

"What kinds of Christmas cards are they selling these days?"

Keith's voice is sour and short, but Lance still snorts at the joke.

And Shiro, eventually, settles on Lance's other side, eases down and sighing long and tiredly before patting his pocket in search of his cigarettes. When he lights one at his lips, his hand finds Lance's as well, deviating in short intervals to pull the stick from his mouth and push out a broad cloud of smoke into the still night air.

Lance grows used to the smell of smoke and the feeling of Keith's skin never gaining enough heat to feel like more than the frigid metal beneath them. He watches the sky and contemplates how they might look to someone through one of the endless, lightless windows around them, if anyone were to take the time to peek outside. Maybe Shiro is right, maybe they're serene and photogenic enough here that they might not look out of place among the long rows of holiday cards at the grocery store. An inscription printed on the inside, maybe, that reads, "Spend time with the ones you love", as Lance knows that he's made his mantra over the last few months.

But it's nice here, a small respite among the endless drawl of stress and suffering and loneliness that comes with sneaking around behind the backs of so many nosy people. It's nice to find himself in a position tonight where the three of them can occupy the same space without worrying about Veronica or Sanda or any number of people in this town who just wouldn't be able to understand them.

After some time passes, Lance speaks.

“I think I know where we should go next.”

Shiro turns his eyes down to him, curious but quiet, and waiting for him to continue. Keith, on his other side, watches something intently in the dark shadows of the night, through the thick wall of trees just beyond the park and through which, Lance suspects that Sanda has parked her car.

He breathes in deeply, tightening his grip on both of their hands and training his eyes back to the night sky.

“It’s something that Veronica mentioned to me,” he says, “And I did some research about it and… she was right. There’s a lot of vampire stuff in New Orleans, like, uh—”

He shakes his head. He’s already started this off poorly, and Keith’s attention has turned back to him abruptly, silencing him under the weight of his own sudden self-doubt, watching him as though he’s just suggested that all three of them join a circus as sideshow attractions.

“I-I just mean, um… there are fake covens and stuff? And vampire tours and big parties dedicated to them and stuff. And it’s warm and busy and there’s always some nightlife going on, so… I don’t think it would be weird to see someone like Keith wandering around, you know? A ton of people pretend to be vampires down there. So if someone accused Keith of that, you know—”

He laughs nervously, wishing that he had a free hand to scratch at the back of his head. He settles instead for clearing his throat, as though his stuttering hasn’t alluded to his uncertainty enough and he needs for both of them to understand how hard this is to suggest.

“People even… have fake fangs made custom for their mouths and they do blood drinking parties and all kinds of weird stuff. I could barely believe it when I read about it, but there’s a bunch of information about it online. We’d be like—”

“Hiding in plain sight.”

Shiro is pensive now, brows furrowed and bottom lip jutted out. His cigarette has been smoked down to the filter again, but he doesn’t seem to have noticed it just yet. He pulls his hand away from Lance, raising it to his face and plucking the nub from his lips, tossing it, for once, into the snow where it fizzles and the cherry fades to a dead and

silent black. Lance can feel Keith watching both of them, can feel him picking apart their intentions with his eyes and waiting impatiently for Shiro to speak. And Shiro does, belatedly, pushing himself up from the merry-go-round with a groan of the aged and rusted joints and swiveling around to look down at both of them.

“That’s amazing, Lance,” he says, and his voice is still distant, still thoughtful as he rests a hand at his chin, watching the black night around them, lost in planning and a train of thought so winding that he stands quiet for a few awkward moments, hovering just above them in sudden jittery excitement. “That could work. That might actually work.”

Keith snickers, bumping Lance in the shoulder with his free fist.

“Nice work, human, looks like you’re capable of pulling your own weight after all.”

It’s a compliment sandwiched in an insult, but Lance still feels the sizzle of pride growing grander and warmer inside of him. He still can’t stop himself from grinning, wide and goofy, and patting himself mentally on the back.

They find themselves tucked away in the apartment hours later, Lance showing Shiro articles that he’s pulled up on his phone, the message boards and the ads for Vampire tours, the nightclubs and parties and the niche events that manage to bridge the gap between the supernatural and the human worlds so successfully that the three of them might be capable of melting just between the seams. He points out notes that he’s bullet-pointed in his mini-notebook, talks to him about the anecdotes that he’s memorized from travel journals and the theories that he has about the three of them learning to fit in among this specific peculiar crowd.

Shiro devours everything eagerly, reads over the text multiple times and repeats the videos until Lance is sure that both of them could recite the words by heart. He digs out a large, faded road map from the messy pile of Keith’s puzzle books in the kitchen. He draws out long pencil paths over the messy eraser marks that sit white against the different colors of each state. He tells Lance that it might be a good idea to deviate from a straight path. He reminisces past experiences, and cites Sanda’s determination to follow them. He then suggests a route to Lance that brings them close to the oceans at the west coast first, the mere concept of which Lance marvels at entirely too much to question the wasted time.

Shiro seems adamant that making a loopy, confusing journey will throw off any trackers from their trail. Lance allows him that assertion because he doesn't have experience with running from the law, or anyone, really. But he offers his own opinions and continues searching for information online. They distract themselves for long hours with planning in the faint light that Shiro's turned on in the kitchen and the glow of Lance's phone screen to illuminate the mess of papers that they've spread out all along the carpet.

Keith slips through the window at some point, bothered by the light and distracted by the sounds of the wilderness in the trees beyond the apartment complex. He says that he's hungry, and Lance and Shiro, distracted and understanding, allow him to go. He's fed from both of them in small increments, but Lance is painfully aware of the fact that he can't offer nearly enough blood while the risk of dying is still so tremendous. He doesn't know how to ask Shiro, or even Keith himself, when the right time might be to "change", like Shiro, years prior, had been changed.

He doesn't know how to broach a subject that he gets the feeling might be a little touchy for Shiro in particular. But he wants to do more than this, to be more helpful and useful to the two of them than simply offering the smallest hint of a lead and the faintest amount of sustenance for Keith at intervals so brief that he's existed in a precarious half-okay state for the last couple of weeks. He's never regained the shine in his hair or the focus in his eyes completely, hasn't had the opportunity to feed in a way that might make his stance less wobbly or his focus more clear, but he's surviving. He's doing okay.

And as always, he hasn't even so much as offered a complaint.

Keith seems to believe that he can manage like this just fine, and Shiro…

Shiro hasn't so much as suggested the idea of Lance doing anything but continuing to be human for maybe the rest of his tragically short life.

Since his brief warnings in the beginning have ebbed away, they haven't talked about it. No advice on the matter, no reassurances. No discussion, as though he refuses to confront the idea of it at all.

Lance gets the feeling that maybe he's trying to ignore it enough that the issue might just go away.

He isn't sure if he's willing to put that kind of pressure on Shiro, among everything else that's weighing him down. But the thought of it still nags at the back of his mind. He can't help but watch as Shiro moves about, as he scribbles his own notes, as he plots a path on that faded, sun-stained map and fiddles with the controls of Lance's phone. He can't stop himself from wondering what could be so bad about becoming a creature like Shiro.

He can't help but worry that maybe, someday, he'll understand what Shiro's so afraid of.

For now, he bites his tongue. They plan, they discuss, they go over their notes dozens of times, then more.

Keith is gone for long hours until the sun begins to hint at the distant silhouettes of the trees.

He's soaked in blood when he returns.

Suspended. Temporary suspension.

Sanda rubs a hand over her face, back leaned against the exterior of her car as she glowers miserably out into the impenetrable black wall of night. Her eyes buzz with tiredness and her belly rumbles in unhappy hunger, and her clothes, unchanged since she'd been called into her boss's office just two days ago, feel paper thin and oily as they cling uncomfortably to her skin. Her face feels dry and her skin flakes off each time that she rubs her hands over it, leaving a thin layer of grease and flecks of dryness on her fingers that she wipes off on her pants. She hasn't been sleeping well, if at all, lately. She hasn't had the urge to retire back to her home since she was given this very obvious cue that her workplace just doesn't care about the wellbeing of its town's inhabitants anymore.

It feels too dangerous to allow the town to exist without protection. At any moment, she fears that she might close her eyes and another innocent inhabitant could be grabbed and gutted, and her superiors would be more than eager to label it as just another animal attack.

It's clear that they've completely checked out and decided, after so many years of serving this town, that their own comfort and laziness are more important than the lives of their neighbors. When she'd been called into the office, she hadn't been certain what she'd find in there, but her gut-feeling wasn't good, and all reasonable thought told her that, surely, they'd be complaining again about her cork board filled with information about Ryou, or the lost time that she's neglected to log in her paperwork. Or the supposedly "erratic" way that everyone claims that she's been acting, even though she feels as though she might be the only sane person left in this entire town.

She feels like she's endlessly pointing at a giant, white elephant in the center of every room that she occupies. As though it's raising its heavy trunk and knocking pencil cups and staplers from the desks of her peers, as though it's tearing open cereal boxes at the grocery store and blocking traffic at the annoying four-way stop in the middle of town. But she's the only one willing to look it in the eyes. She jabs a finger in its direction, begs someone else to see its hefty body crammed in the center of everything. But they avert their eyes and plug their ears, and Sanda, for some reason, is labeled as the crazy one for refusing to ignore the truth.

She's felt villainized in her pursuit of justice, crucified by her adamance to seek the truth about the strange goings on in town while it seems that everyone around her is more than content being picked off like pigs at the local factory, shoved in line at the mouth of those rusted trucks as they've sorted for slaughter.

She won't go down so easily. She won't allow a monster like Ryou Yamazaki to best her.

But at the office, she'd felt small and petty and silly. She'd felt like a child sitting across a wide, glossy desk from the principal, in trouble for pulling a girl's pigtails or shoving a boy too hard at recess. She'd fretted nervously with the buttons of her jacket and laced her shaking fingers together to still them. Her boss, with Detective Iverson leaned against the wall behind him, had looked at her for a long, quiet moment before Iverson had shoved forward and drawn out a long and tired breath. He'd slid a small stack of papers and a pale, thin folder across the surface of the desk towards her.

They'd given her the usual lecture about stepping out of bounds and taking her job too seriously. They'd cited a complaint that they'd received from that McClain harlot about their exchange in the grocery store, corroborated by a stock boy who'd witnessed the entire

encounter from a hidden vantage point just a few aisles over. She'd been expecting a slap on the wrist, just like every other time. She'd already readied a stock apology and the proper look of embarrassed remorse. She couldn't have imagined then that suddenly they'd start taking claims from that woman seriously. After so many years that Sendak had screened her calls, Sanda had forgotten that other detectives on the force might not have been as jaded about her complaints.

Sanda's never liked Iverson much, always found him to be too soft when push came to shove, never quite willing to take an objective stance in any situation when a person struck the right chord with him. She reasons that his softness in relation to Ryou is another good example of his weakness and stupidity. He'd been on medical leave when the McClains pulverized their car at the gully of that cliffside. He hadn't witnessed the wreckage or the violence of nature splintered hard into the center of their lives. He hadn't seen the saturation of the blood against the sparkling blanket of snow until long after the road crews had cleared it away.

Iverson had been the only officer to attend the funeral. His wife, bedridden with sickness, had been friends with Lance's mother. He'd brought a bouquet of chrysanthemum and left it rested on a table next to the closed caskets. He'd told Sanda later, when she'd guiltily asked, that Hell itself might have been more pleasant than the sound of that little kid crying among the stuffy, agonized silence that filled the church.

But he hadn't seen the wreckage. He had no idea what he was talking about. Foolish enough to think that the human reaction to tragedy could ever be more violent than the scene itself, Sanda finds that she still has no respect for a man unhardened by the ugliness of the world. She'd been offended then, that her boss had allowed him to witness this exchange. She should have known back then that if a peer were there to accompany her, it either meant suspension or termination.

They'd told her, as she'd reached nervous fingers forward and ghosted them over the cover of the folder, that she'd "exhibited a pattern of blatant disregard for the law and the rubric that police officers are obligated to abide by". They'd said that she was a danger to others and herself.

Iverson's soft words were a blur in her ears as she struggled to decipher the text on the papers. The letters bled together and seemed to be written in another language entirely. She couldn't make sense of

them or what was happening. Her badge and her gun felt insurmountably heavy as she'd plucked them from her person and dropped them with a clatter on the desk.

"It's temporary, detective," her boss had told her, "Just until you can sort yourself out. Some time away should be nice, right? Like a paid vacation. A couple of weeks to yourself."

They'd tucked a pamphlet for a mental health retreat in the paperwork that they'd seen her off with. She'd tossed the whole folder in the garbage after picking through it with gritted teeth and a surge of hot anger licking like fire through her chest. She'd been thankful only that she'd taken the time to pack up her Yamazaki evidence prior, just after the Sendak case closed. She'd been thankful that she hadn't needed to take anything else from her office. She isn't sure even now if she could have stomached all of those nosy eyes burning holes into her back as she packed her things and left.

Everything is in boxes in her car now, piled in the backseat, unpacked in the passenger's side and picked through when the need arises. Her photos of Ryou and Lance consorting, her notes from the various biology books that she's checked out from the library. A line of names traced back from Takashi Shirogane to Ryou Yamazaki and a parallel path of bloodshed left in his wake, they're all organized eclectically on the dash and in the floor and on the seats. Her entire existence these days is concentrated in the boxes and files and paperwork that rest inside of her car. She has almost everything that she needs now, if she can piece it together properly. She knows that Yamazaki is some kind of monster. She knows that this isn't just a simple open and shut case that she's invested so much time in that she's conjuring phantoms out of thin air.

She has proof, if anyone is actually willing to look at it. Undeniable and unflinching and organized so perfectly that it would be impossible for even the pickiest skeptic to find a single loose thread in her logic.

She just doesn't have anyone to present this information to anymore.

She has no one left in her corner, no officer or detective or friend to reach out to in this town.

She clicks her tongue, tucking her arms around herself and feeling comforted, at least, by the feeling of her gun hard in its holster against her side. They'd taken her police-assigned handgun, but she has a small arsenal locked in a safe in her bedroom, hidden away for home

security just in case and so neglected that she'd spent nearly three hours cleaning each of her weapons and testing their accuracy in the woods behind her house before she'd felt confident enough to carry one on her person. She isn't sure exactly what she'd do now if she were to get Ryou alone. Lance McClain, she knows that she wouldn't hurt him, still isn't entirely positive that he's an active part of the scheme or that he's even aware of what sort of monster he's allowed himself to become entangled with. She suspects that he might be an unwilling and unknowing accessory, human body armor artfully wrapped around Ryou to protect him from anyone with a conscience. She has no qualms against holding Lance McClain responsible legally for the crimes that he unwittingly went along with, but she wouldn't kill him—wouldn't hurt him if she didn't have to.

She knows, deep down, that she wouldn't be able to shoulder that extra weight on her conscience. She'd feel his mother's dying eyes branded ever-darker in her heart if she did. She knows that she'd never be able to shake off the sensation that she'd ruined that woman's life two times.

But as it is, Ryou isn't in her sights anymore anyway. He's inaccessible inside of his apartment. On the closed trunk of her car, she's rested her binoculars. She'd peered through them and watched Ryou returning home from work, watched him creep behind the solid wall of evergreens that blocked her view of the park beyond it. And he'd procured Lance from there, who she'd lost sight of once he'd left his apartment and taken refuge where she couldn't see, and walked him back through the courtyard and up the stairs in jittery shadows that seemed to crawl frantically when she'd attempted to photograph both of them heading back inside.

Something is very wrong with that man, and she knows it, but she also knows that no one would believe her on nothing but a gut feeling. Nothing but firsthand accounts of technology frenzied as she's pointed it in his direction at the right moments, nothing but an instinctual sensation of wrongness emanating from his direction each time that the sun sets at the horizon and drags the light down with it.

It's curious, the way that her camera always glitches out at moments like these, because she's printed numerous photographs of Ryou over the months, taken short videos and collected DNA samples and spoken with him face to face. On most occasions, as he's entering his car in the early evening and smoking outside of work, when he loiters outside late in the night and lights a cigarette with his back planted against his front door, she's managed to collect data without incident.

She's never had trouble with her camera during the day.

But sometimes, in the depths of nights just as black and silent as these, the shadows themselves seem to expand and fall in labored breathing. She feels watched as the wind contorts into noises so eerily human that they might as well be whispers. She can hear them sometimes in her nightmares, and see, sometimes in her dreams, a version of Ryou that turns around and grins at her with spade teeth and black eyes and an appropriate level of menacing ferality that might coerce her peers into finally believing her.

But it's nonsense, she knows. A late night playing tricks on her eyes. Technology on the fritz in too cold of temperatures. Her own sleeplessness looming over her and distorting reality to suit her wildest paranoia. She isn't even sure why she's still freezing out here in the cold. Why she hesitates before climbing back into her car and driving home. She knows from experience of watching the two of them that they're not very likely to come back outside once they retire for the night. Ryou, sometimes, will tuck himself against the front door and smoke fleetingly, late into the evening, but it's rare on nights when Lance sleeps over. Lance won't show his face again until he creeps across the courtyard at dawn and slips back into his sister's apartment for a few minutes to collect the children and walk them to the bus. Sometimes they'll drive to the diner and have breakfast. Sanda's collected photos of them dining through the wide windows just near the front of the restaurant.

Like a montage broken down into stills, she has a small but growing collection of Lance eating various flavors of pancakes. Ryou seems to settle on coffee and the country fried steak. Lance sometimes chooses strawberry syrup in lieu of maple. Sometimes he orders french toast.

It's infuriating that any of these mundane details might matter. It's humiliating to think that she might spend the rest of her life with the ins and outs of Lance McClain's breakfast regime nagging at the back of her thoughts.

But it's good, she thinks, to be thorough. She doesn't suppose that all of her questions about this case could be so easily answered by the specific flavor of jam that Ryou Yamazaki peels open for his toast, but maybe there's something in the way that he finagles it. With how he crooks his arm with practiced dexterity to carry out these tasks. How he always rises when Lance returns from the bathroom in an outdated emulation of chivalry that's long since shifted out of vogue.

There's something telling in the way that he carries himself, as though Sanda can see a reflection of the boys who she grew up with in that pallid face. In the quiet stretches of silence, left alone despondently with tired half-thoughts in her dark bedroom, she might mistake the smiling face of a boy in her distant memory for Ryou's handsome grin. Might forget if she'd reached out and taken him by the left hand or a missing right, if she'd tucked herself into a loud and abrasive, churning rusted skeleton of a vehicle or if she's misremembering the entire thing.

She wouldn't say that she has any level of affinity for a man like Ryou Yamazaki, but it's more that he reminds her of a now faraway time, a faded memory of a life that she'd led before things became so different and so complicated. When Sanda herself was young and full of purpose and ambition, and she didn't spend the long hours of her day agonized by crippling regret and arthritis that aches from her wrists into her elbows, her knees into her calves, and a startling and overwhelming determination that zaps her of sleep and appetite until she's successfully completed whichever mission she's set her sights on. He reminds her of a reality so long-dead that it feels surreal now, when she might have reached out to the world and to a man with dainty and unmarred hands. When she wore her hair longer, down her back in wide, flowing curls, and when gentlemen still had manners. When men opened car doors and smiled at their dates the way that Ryou Yamazaki smiles at Lance McClain. Like they're made of starlight. Like they're the most magnificent masterpiece that the universe could have ever crafted.

He's a relic that she recognizes from a dusty memory of her twenties. Tucked away and kept safe from the sun like her mother's wedding dress in the back of her closet. Revealed only now, as though sparkling new, but dated by the frills and glitter. By the awkward way that Ryou often extends these courtesies to the young Lance McClain, who doesn't understand them enough to even catch the cues. The silent invitation to loop an arm in his to steady themselves while they walk. The subtle tip of an umbrella upward to usher him under when it's raining.

Sanda's chest aches. A time long ago, before everything became so complicated…

She tells herself that she regrets nothing. She's done everything all along that she could have known to do.

She'd never married, never settled down and started a family. She's

never liked children or animals. She's never felt the need to weigh herself down with the oppressive presence of another living creature.

But she wonders sometimes how it might feel to be Lance McClain, to find herself so charmed by a bashful smile and a polished collection of manners that she might be able to overlook the ominousness underlying every gap in Ryou's friendly facade. She wonders if she'd be so foolish, too, if she were so in love.

She wonders if her life would have turned out differently, had she ever folded to the autocratic burdens of womanhood.

There's no room in her reality anymore for doubt or regret. There's no reason to reminisce the *could haves* and s *hould haves* when she knows that she's never been very good at tolerating other people anyway.

The darkness around her feels stifling and terribly empty in the early hours of the night. Few cars rumble down the street before her, and hers is the only one parked in this particular lot so late at night. Her breath hangs in front of her in thick clouds as she breathes, calming herself and slipping momentarily into standing sleep. Wondering guiltily if she's allowed important intel to slip through the cracks while inattentive like this, but knowing that retiring home in the dreadful lonely silence there would only result in hours spent awake in endless frustration in bed, tossing and turning and adjusting the settings on her white noise machine as though it could ever drown out the judgemental voices in her thoughts. The pristine image of Ryou's soft smile branded just behind her eyes. Lance McClain's grating laughter. And the whispers, drowned over her like the syrup that Lance McClain smothers over his pancakes. Ever-present and unending, and enveloping her even now.

The idea that she's run out of time. That things will continue moving forward without her, and now she's been given no option but to thrash and struggle but inevitably give under their weight.

She's virtually powerless, if she decides to tackle this legally. She's run out of options when she thinks about stopping a man like Ryou with the full power of her badge and title. She knows that she's skirting the option now of moving forward beyond the scope of her job, powering through the legwork during the assigned downtime of her suspension. Going rogue, maybe, because it's the only way that she can do this anymore. She could get in even more trouble if they caught her. But she could save everything, even after messing up, if she caught Yamazaki in the act first.

Or even if she could corner him, kill him, and dispose of the body in a way reminiscent of all of the Takashi's and Ito's and dozens of other men's disappearances in the past. She knows that she can get this done if she's given just enough time. She has to. No matter what, she can't allow these men to pass on to another town. She can't let history repeat itself as it has unhindered over and over again.

She needs to put an end to this. She knows undoubtedly, that if they leave here and shed their current identities, she won't be able to find them again.

There's a rustling in the bushes that catches her attention, and she whips around, hand falling down to ghost her fingers over the butt of her gun in its holster. She finds nothing but still trees, dark branches swaying in the gentle breeze, snow still clinging to the edges of them but ultimately unsubstantial no matter how long she allows her eyes to pick through the unmoving dark. It must have been an animal. Her breath pushes through her, stilted and heavy. She needs to take a nap, at least. She's going to drive herself insane out here.

But there's a looming sense now of being watched that crawls under her skin and sleeps restlessly inside of it. Alight with sudden anxiety, still coiled and stiff and unable to relax as fresh adrenaline courses through her veins, she clears her throat and emulates a casual lean against her trunk again. The trees shudder, she bites the inside of her lip and forces her eyes forward. Maybe she's already gone insane, she isn't sure. She's allowing herself to be intimidated by random, harmless forest creatures. In the trees, surely, a squirrel scurries from branch to branch, unknowing of how it's afflicted her.

But she can't shrug off this sudden sense that there are eyes on her and breath clouded at the shell of her ear. She reminds herself that her keys are in the ignition of her car still, window rolled down to air out the ripe smell of rotten fast food bags left to fester over the two days spent sleeping inside of it. She could leap through the open window if she had to. She could escape from here in seconds flat if the need to do so arose.

But she can't stop herself from feeling trapped suddenly, walled off by her own solitude in a quiet night in this unsavory edge of town. Even the apartment complex across the stretch of road is distant enough from where she stands that she isn't certain that anyone could hear her if she were to yell. The few businesses occupying this area have long-since closed and left only empty husks of dark buildings behind as an unseeing, unhearing backdrop to her current unsettling

predicament. Sanda feels weighed down by her own aloneness, destitute and stranded here, standing in the center of the grainy gravel of the parking lot, the slick black asphalt road between her and another living, breathing human suddenly daunting as she considers how quickly she might be able to sprint across it, through the mouth of the apartment complex, and find a door to bang on that might actually be occupied by someone who will answer her before whatever's watching her now manages to catch her.

And she isn't even sure that anything *is* watching her. She can't be certain that the periodic shuffling in the trees is actually some kind of starving predator or just a bird roosting in its nest for the night. Her breath-clouds sputter in the frigid air. Her hands shake as she fumbles in her pockets to find her phone. Her fingers knock against a half-smoked pack of cigarettes, a familiar brand that she'd bought yesterday and refused to admit where she'd seen it before.

That monster , she grimaces. She'd tried to imagine how the filter would feel and the smoke would sting and how the ricochet of adrenaline newly introduced in a person's system might enable them to make riskier decisions. There's no correlation between nicotine intake and crime. There were only studies about income versus tobacco consumption that she could find at the library. It doesn't matter that criminals smoke cigarettes, because just as many honest citizens smoke them as well.

But she'd thought—hoped, maybe—that if she felt any different smoking the same brand as that man, maybe something would click for her. Maybe she'd understand him more deeply. Maybe it would do more than set fire in her lungs that had her heaving and retching for nearly ten minutes until she'd managed to uncap her water bottle and take a long, fretful drink. It had been years before then, since she'd sneaked a few cigarettes during P.E. behind the bleachers in high school, longer even still than fuzzy memories of her mother propped with razorblade elbows against the kitchen table with an ever-present stick between her long, ruby-toned fingernails, bird-boned and graceful and forever cemented in her memory in the long floral dresses that she'd sewn from mismatched curtains that she'd thrifted from the Salvation Army.

Sanda remembers a hazy past before the FDA discovered that tobacco wasn't quite as good for humans as the American public might have originally anticipated. She remembers the smell of stale cigarettes on her prom date's jacket when he'd walked her back to her front porch. She sees these people in Yamazaki's smile, imagines the way that he

might have leaned against the jagged rows of metal bleachers frying in the late spring sun, dressed in the high-waisted, boxy gym shorts and the loose t-shirt tucked in. Slipped a cigarette box under the waistband of his pants and kept the lighter secured in an empty gap left by already smoked sticks. She can place him there easily, between the blurry edges of old memories. She can see him everywhere, anymore, in the faces of serial killers in documentaries on TV, in the mugshots of *America's Most Wanted* . In crime scene photos and history books, and in the darkest reaches of her dreams when she actually manages to sleep.

Anymore, Ryou Yamazaki has become an obsession. One that now, she tucks around herself like a warm comfort blanket as she tugs the box of cigarettes from her coat pocket and pulls the lighter from the empty spot inside. She puts one to her lips, lights it clumsily with the lighter secured in just her left hand. Counts the seconds that it takes to ignite without another arm to shield it, and imagines what might be driving up her nerves in a position such as this. Yamazaki seems proud of himself from afar, seems cocky about his safe position just mere centimeters above the fingers of the law. She doesn't know what might upset him enough that he often comes outside three to four times during his nights off and every break during his shifts at the hospital. She isn't sure what he's running from, from which facet of his life he might be seeking refuge.

But she imagines how it might feel to be greeted by a person like Lance McClain and to occupy a space within close proximity of him. She imagines a conversation that they might have, how Ryou's body might angle itself as though drawn to Lance's orbit. How Lance might cross his arms to shield himself from the cold and drop back his head to gaze up at the stars.

Lance might ask, "How was work tonight?"

Ryou might respond, "There's a doctor who I wouldn't mind gutting someday."

Casual discussion of murder and violence, she isn't sure if it's comically blown out of proportion. She can't wrap her head around what these two men might talk about, however, can't envision in her mind's eye what a spineless wisp of a man like Lance McClain might find charming about a solid wall of muscle like Ryou. Feels flustered and inappropriate when she recounts how many nights the two of them retire into the same apartment, and what they might fill their time with in the absence of actual conversation.

That part is none of her business. She aches with the need to understand their situation more fully, but finds that perhaps they can keep those details to themselves.

The trees behind her shake hard. Sanda flinches, drops the cigarette without thinking, and reels back as the lit tip makes contact with her hand before tumbling to the ground. It fizzles in the wet of melted snow down there, and she reels around, eyes wide and heart thumping wildly as she takes another long moment to pick, terrified, through the churning dark.

The leaves of the trees bounce and bop and slow down before stopping. She drags out another shaky breath. Her hand at her holster tingles with the beginnings of a white-hot blister. She hisses a curse, shaking her head. And just as she turns to grab her binoculars and carry them back to her car, there's a loud, groaning boom against the side of her car, as though someone has kicked it. As though the steel of it has bent into the frame so violently that the car itself jostles and shakes on its wheels. She tears back, stumbling over her own feet and crunching in the rock beneath them. She draws her gun and flips off the safety, loads a bullet into the chamber with a quiet click that sounds like cannon fire in her ears. Her heart, her blood through her veins, the whispers closing in all around here, they're deafening. The world around her is silent and blinding black. She hears the trees at the opposite end of the parking lot rustle, resists the urge to fire a warning shot out there in fear of alerting anyone in the parking lot or dark apartments across the road. And there's silence, suddenly, heavy and profound and abruptly surprising. A world that felt ripe with life just moments ago is suddenly devoid of anything but Sanda, her car, and the dark.

Those whispers, like cricket song in the late summer, are suddenly absent. They'd seeped into her ears so slowly that she hadn't really paid them much of any mind at all. Background noise, she's a frog boiled too slow to even think to jump out of the pot. She struggles to breathe, falls against the side of her car and levels herself against it as jellied knees refuse to carry all of her weight. In the blackness, she can barely discern the wide crater of a hole now embedded deep in her driver's side door. It looks like she was hit by a confused deer. It looks like the door itself might not even open properly, as though it's been welded forcefully shut. Gun tucked safely back into its holster, she gropes at the dent and marvels at the depth of it, the curl of the steel pushed inward, the feeling of the paint splintered off and bent about like clay that's hardened to ceramic. She swallows, her throat suddenly feeling like sandpaper. She grasps loosely at the window sill

and scrambles to reach through and turn her keys in the ignition. She has a flashlight in the cup holder that she can use to look around. She can find it if she can turn the key and activate the interior lights.

The keys turns eventually as she struggles with still-trembling hands. She curses wildly in small puffs of breathlessness, her heart pounding so hard in her chest that she feels as though she's pulsing along with it. The car dings twice, the engine bubbles to life, the lights overhead click on and her eyes dart down, catching something there. Zoomed in suddenly on a mess of wet and heaving, twitching *something* that drives bile up in her throat.

Her eyes meet beady black. She sees the smallest pinpricks of her reflection bounced back up at her, catches the way that damp red soaks into the furry edges, how the clawed feet twitch, the pads of them turned up and contorted unnaturally into the cold air.

She bites out a hoarse cry, trips backward, heels catching on the rock and slipping on the melted ice. Tumbling down onto her backside roughly and scrambling backward ever-further in a desperate attempt to put as much space between herself and what she found inside of her vehicle as possible.

She heaves a breath, stomach turning. She feels sickness boiling up from her belly and crawling in her throat.

For a brief moment, snapshot memories of the McClain deaths blip behind her eyes, flicker in her brain and fill her veins with solid ice.

Brassy, dark blood drips from the center of the driver's seat onto the papers collected in the floorboards. Tendon splays out and black, glossy eyes stare blindly up at the ceiling. Matted, crimson-stained fur heaves upward in a final flurry of desperate breaths. Intestines, long and coiled and inky purple, a stomach burst and pulverized. Twitching paws—some kind of animal. An animal gutted and left mutilated in her seat.

A giant dent punched into the side of her car.

A creature strong enough to bend steel and violent enough to mutilate an animal beyond recognition.

'Just like it did to Sendak,' is the thought that flitters at the corners of her consciousness.

Sanda stares into the night with wide eyes, feels incapable of catching

her breath, feels scuffed palms catching dust and rock as she tenses them into fists.

Her headlights beam brightly against the line of evergreens at the far end of the parking lot. Dust rises from the ground as she pulls herself up, sparkling black in the light beams, crunching under her boots. Her seatbelt detector chirps incessantly. The lights inside are yellow and blinding enough that she squints through them as she pulls herself up and rounds the car again.

A trash bag filled with evidence is emptied out, and the bag itself shields her pants from the blood soaked into the seat. The torn remains of this unfortunate furry creature are tossed out into the parking lot. Sanda steadies herself against the car door for a long moment as she takes another look at the treeline, the parking lot, the apartment complex, dark and silent, across the road.

She climbs inside of her car and peels out of the parking lot, dust clouds billowing behind her, tires leaving dark tracks against the street.

She doesn't sleep for the rest of the night, even after she gets home.

Her thoughts are occupied by the whispering. The words, so quiet that she couldn't have hoped to understand them even if she'd been paying close enough attention.

She lies awake in bed and stares at her dark ceiling, jolted into awakeness every time that a car passes through the street outside of her window and the headlights move shadows over the length of her walls.

Those whispers, ebbed in like quiet ocean waves, crashing gradually. A tsunami swirling in the water. Covering her and trapping her before she'd even known that she was drowning.

But that voice, it wasn't Ryou's, wasn't Lance's, wasn't anyone who she'd heard speak before.

Quiet and gruff, a multiplicity of phrases whipped past her like sleet in winter storms.

What were they saying?

What were they saying?

What were they saying?

Chapter 25

Lance yawns, rolling his shoulders forward then back, slowly working out the tension bundled just between his shoulder blades. He stretches himself out, arms extended high above his head in the air as he straightens his back and feels the pleasurable few pops that this affords him.

There are several notable perks accompanying his semi-regular sleepovers at Shiro and Keith's apartment, sure, but he can't deny that it's doing a number on his spine. He isn't sure how Shiro's possibly survived, roughing it on hard surfaces for the last however many years, but he wonders if perhaps that's simply just another thing that his heightened senses and overall superior physical makeup, via Keith, has graced him with.

Now, however, Lance is still woefully human and still not particularly used to sleeping on a surface devoid of his soft mattress and extra spongy mattress pad. He's still a little raw from the scratch of the rough sheets and the carpet fibers that his arms dragged against when he rolled over last night. His neck feels stiff when he turns it in the wrong direction and there's an ache bundled just at the peak of his hairline. He's still yet to become brave enough to ask Shiro or Keith for a massage, isn't sure if he'll ever be brazen enough to request that sort of service outright.

So, for now, he suffers through work with sore muscles and he wonders if Veronica is still hiding that massage ball that she'd brought home from a health convention that Dr. Smythe invited her to at the town's rec center last spring.

It's a slow night in the convenience store tonight. Lance has counted a grand total of three customers who have braved the spitting sleet to buy their beef jerky and cheap beer and soft pretzels with cheese. The current highlight of his evening was a customer who came up three cents short for an extra pack of cigarettes that they elected to purchase just after he rung everything out. Slipping the pennies from the change jar and covering the price was the height of his excitement. Their heartfelt thanks had felt like the sole positive among an otherwise monotonous, droll evening.

Since then, in the absence of any real work or customer interactions, Hunk has been talking to him nonstop about some new television show that he's found himself invested in lately. It's some soap opera-

level drama about love triangles and… ghosts or something. Lance isn't sure. He hasn't been paying close enough attention to catch more than a few stray sentences. Maybe there was a ritual, satanic sacrifice? Something spooky that had kept Hunk up late at night. Something just blood curdling enough for the average watcher like Hunk, who surely hasn't faced more violence or animalistic terror than watching those sorts of shows, that he can't stop backtracking just to reminisce how horrifying those scenes were, and how each of them had kept him successfully glued to the edge of his seat.

Lance tries hard to focus more fully, feels guilty that he can't afford Hunk his full attention when the two of them haven't spent much time at all together over the last few months and Lance knows that soon, he won't see him ever again. But it's difficult to pry himself totally out of his thoughts when his life lately has revolved so wholly around leaving and planning and being careful. When these days, he feels as though Hunk and his past self might as well be an entire universe away.

He's been eyeing the dark window for long, quiet stretches of time. He imagines that somewhere out in the chilly distance, Keith might be creeping through the black trees and silently making his voyeuristic rounds about the town. He thinks about Shiro, too, working his shift at the hospital, going about his business as usual, as though he won't leave soon at all. Shiro, he supposes, is probably used to this routine by now. Shiro probably doesn't feel as though slipping away without a trace will be more than just another step in the long, unending pattern that is his existence as an undying guardian of a powerful, immortal beast.

Lance thinks that maybe, someday, he'll get used to it as well, especially when his roots haven't been planted and grown stunted for as many years as they've dithered here, in this place. Regardless of his feelings for the town itself and the vast majority of the faceless populace, he knows that some connections will be more difficult to sever. Hunk, of course, is one of them. And Veronica and the kids, Dr. Smythe, the nicer customers. The friendly waitresses at the diner, his boss and fellow janitors at the middle school.

He wonders how it might feel to shrug off his identity like a coat at the door, welcomed into a home too warm to wear it. How it might be to slip the skin of his prior person from his bare bones and build onto that again. A new name, a new personality. He wonders how many faces Shiro has unhooked from the base of his neck like the clasp at the back of the kids' Halloween costumes. If it will always feel like

he's wearing a costume or if maybe sometimes Shiro forgets. Maybe sometimes he's Ryou Yamazaki for real, a flesh and blood man dying every moment that passes. A person who, like most other people, will someday sleep in a grave under six feet of cold ground. He wonders what it might feel like to be a specter in the lives of others as his parents have been for many years now. Dead in all ways that matter to his loved ones. Disappeared into thin air like snow melted and subsequently evaporated from the warm fabric of his clothes.

Keith had filled the puzzle book that he'd brought to the apartment for him within twenty minutes of opening it. He'd filled out the entire thing without hesitation in pen. Lance had watched him, marveled at the sight of his dark eyes flipping over the letters printed uniform on each page, the jumble of them pieced apart in patterns apparent immediately to Keith's watchful eye.

There hadn't been any unfinished circles or wonky loops or unsure marks made there. Lance had flipped through it afterward as though checking his work, drinking in the sight of each neatly-drawn cross through the right words, each page colored over in dark, orderly blue. He'd asked Keith how he was so confident that he wouldn't make mistakes. What he might do if he were to begin circling a word only to discover that he was wrong.

And Keith, as always, forward and blunt and without the nervousness or insecurity that weighed down most humans, had fixed him with a short, flat frown, shrugged his shoulders, and trained his eyes for a moment on the shadowed wall across from him, listening to whatever he could hear through the plaster.

"Puzzles are easy because there's always a right or wrong answer."

Cryptic and admittedly not even a proper answer to his question, but Lance had accepted it without further questions nonetheless.

Hunk is talking about his show again, hands waving wildly in the air and jostling the twin bags of chips that he's restocking as he complains about a plotline that's been stressing him out.

Lance snaps back to attention, guiltily offering the proper *'oh'* s and *'ah'* s as Hunk rambles. He feels each click of the clock on the wall behind him pounding like a gavel in the back of his buzzing skull. He's a little on edge tonight, but he's not quite sure why. Hunk had given him a curious look when he'd taken off his coat and revealed the rarely-used long sleeve uniform shirt underneath, and while he'd

accepted Lance's reasoning that he hadn't remembered to do laundry since they were tasked with cleaning the floors and he wasn't exactly eager to show off the new series of dark stains that might be impossible to get out of the fabric, Lance has an uncomfortable feeling that somehow, everyone who meets him and speaks to him fleetingly as they pay for their things somehow knows exactly what he's hiding on his wrist.

The new teeth marks had been pretty ugly when he'd woken up this morning. Shiro had reassured him that his skin will get used to the constant assaults in time. He'd been horrified, however, when his wrist had been so swollen that it nearly doubled the size of its opposite twin, and he'd compared both of them together privately, later, when he'd stopped by the apartment to gather his things for work.

The indentations of the fangs had looked like thick needle punctures, bloated and purple with bruises that spread out all along his inflamed wrist, fading just at the puffy edges staving off into his forearm. He'd put some ice on it for a while before he'd needed to leave for work. And then, he'd had the foresight to dig through the medicine cabinet in search for some aspirin before he'd taken off. It's gone down somewhat over the last few hours thankfully, but even now, under the overly scratchy edge of his sleeve, it's so bulgy that the fabric feels uncomfortably contorted over it. Like a blueberry heated in the microwave, he thinks. Like he's just a few seconds away from bursting open and squirting some kind of ungodly congealed blood and pus combination all over the next sorry sucker who tries to buy a roll of lottery tickets.

He sighs deeply, leaning forward with his elbows on the counter and watching as Hunk makes slow passes through the aisles, re-facing all of the packages that have gotten messed up throughout the day. It's only an hour and a half into his shift now, but Hunk will be heading home soon. Give or take another hour, depending on how slow it is or how passionately he continues to rant about his TV show until he realizes that he's run out the clock.

He's already mentally mapping out how he might be able to clean the middle school quickly enough that he can hide away in the janitor's closet for an extended nap. He thinks that he might be able to start with the windows and do the floors last, which under most circumstances might not be the best idea. Maybe, then, he'll be able to use the excuse that he wasn't thinking right, he forgot, and he wasn't able to do any extra work because he'd successfully trapped himself

behind a wall of wet floors, even though he knows with certainty that the school has never actually managed to get their security cameras to function and they're tucked in the corners as more of the illusion of safety than something to actually worry about or rely on.

There isn't too much danger involved in being bad just this once. He's been a dutiful employee since he got the job, and even though it stings just a bit to consider, he knows that he won't be there for much longer anyway.

Not like he'll ever be able to use them as a reference on any applications, he thinks. It's not like anything that he does as Lance McClain will follow him once Shiro receives their new identities and they finally find the best opportunity to leave.

Hunk is now explaining the love triangle in the show and touting the redeeming qualities of the romantic interest that he'd personally chosen for the protagonist. He's growing winded as he continues to rant about it, and only after the door opens and the bells overhead jingle does he yell to Lance over the back rows that he's gonna take his final break outside.

Lance rolls his eyes, grinning sardonically and waving him off. Typical, he thinks, but it's no big deal. He'll let Hunk get his extended break to play whatever mobile game he's invested in outside for a few extra minutes, and he won't complain too much about being offered a very welcome distraction. If tonight continues being so slow, he isn't sure if he'll make it until the end of his shift without dozing off at the front counter.

He calls out his greeting after the door clicks closed. The customer ducks into the belly of the store behind the aisles so quickly that he barely catches a glimpse of them in time. Sleek black coat and gray hair, pale skin. It could be anyone in this town, he thinks. Any number of elderly weirdos could fit that bill perfectly.

He sucks in another breath, straightening his posture. Weirdos aren't exactly a rarity at a job like this, so he knows better than to feel too concerned about it. Probably just some tweaker nervously working themselves up to asking him for Cigarillos. Or a minor finding the guts to present him with their fake I.D., or any number of different people from unique situations that might cause them to act just as strangely in a convenience store, and he's seen a lot of them. A lot of oddities. A lot of customers who he'd rather not have met.

The music overhead is so quiet that he can barely make out the tune of it as he closes his eyes and focuses on the scratch of it through the speakers. He dithers for an extended period of time, swinging his arms at his sides restlessly and peering around for some task to busy himself with. He could take apart the cheese machine again and clean it, but he isn't positive that he could finish that task before his customer collects their things and nears the counter to be checked out. He could sweep, but that would be the third time that he and Hunk have swept the floors today. He thinks about balancing the drawer, but he did that, too, when he clocked in. Hunk faced the shelves already and restocked the coolers before Lance even arrived here. There isn't a lot to do now, but he's vibrating with the need to be occupied, so he settles on fiddling with the long rows of chewing tobacco shelved just behind him. It needs to be checked for expired containers again, rearranged to display the ones that will go bad soonest, then shed of any cans that have gone off since they checked last time. Any stock that hasn't sold well needs to be logged for their manager to look over later. It's the perfect job to fill his time with until either Hunk comes back from his break or his mysterious customer decides that they're ready to wow him with whatever ridiculous thing they've actually come in here tonight to request from him.

It's a job that he accepts eagerly, relieved when his hands are busied and he actually does manage to find a few pots of chew that have just barely exceeded their shelf life. He turns his head to inspect the store behind him as he tosses those pots into the trash. He still can't spot more than the vaguest whispers of the customer creeping between the shelves. He can hear their quiet footfalls just over the hum of the music and the vibrations of the coolers, the churning and bubbling of syrup in the soda machines and slushies mixing together in the dispensers. He can barely make out the sound of chip bags crunching and the metal keychains fumbling together on the racks. He steadies himself and continues sorting through the chewing tobacco. He wonders what sort of lunacy this customer is going to put him through once they reach the counter with their things.

It's always the weird ones who ask if they can fill their purses with nacho cheese or attempt to buy gas for their car when they walked here without a tank in hand. It's always the people who shirk away and refuse to be greeted who present him with the truly mind-boggling experiences, and he'd be lying if he claimed that he wasn't looking forward to being surprised by whatever this customer has to offer him tonight, especially since Hunk isn't around to suffer through it with him.

It's a cherished pastime of theirs to reminisce all of the stranger customers that they've been forced to consort with when they were totally by themselves. Lance, so far, is losing their silent contest by a few loonies, ever since Hunk spent a startling forty-five minutes arguing with a middle-aged soccer-mom-type about one of the energy drink brands that they've been selling since Lance started working here. She'd claimed that she'd heard that guarana was a street name for cocaine, that all of them should be ashamed in themselves for allowing minors to purchase "drugs" so easily. Hunk didn't even drink energy drinks, tries hard to stay healthy and skirt the more sugar-packed beverages that Lance guzzles day-to-day just to keep himself awake. But he'd found himself on the defensive in the face of such an unexpected tirade, and when poor, overworked Officer Kinkade had finally arrived on the scene to clear her out, he'd been absolutely bewildered when Hunk hadn't even batted an eye at the woman's loud, raving indignance.

Hunk had told Lance later, *"I didn't even call the cops! She did! I guess she thought they'd slap some cuffs on me for peddling drugs to innocent kids. Kinkade's a good guy, sure, but I don't think he realized that you deal with more lunatics working in retail than he probably sees in a month at the police department. I told him that if he ever wants to see the real action, he should put in an application."*

Lance had laughed then, and mentally tallied the additional points to Hunk's impressive roster. He's dealt with a few weirdos himself since then, but nothing quite as impressive or extended as that. Nothing quite as resulting in police intervention as the incident with Sanda weeks ago, that both of them still feel so weird about that they haven't even considered it to be part of the game.

Aside from Sanda, winter has kept many people confined to their homes over the last few months, and things have been unfortunately dry.

He hopes that this one is juicy enough to make up for it. He feels just a little bit silly for feeling the anticipation and excitement bubble up inside of him as he idly checks the expiration dates on each container of chew.

He's tossed a few more of them into the trash when he hears his customer setting their things down on the counter. He straightens himself up again, turning with one container still in hand as he manufactures a smile to greet the person behind him with. He opens his mouth to ask if they've found everything okay, reaches out and

grasps a single keychain from the counter between his fingers, but then his eyes find theirs. His mind stalls and sputters and struggles to piece together the image of the person standing quietly with squared shoulders and hard eyes watching him intently. He's so surprised when he recognizes their face that the tobacco can that he's accidentally carried over slips through his fingers, clattering loudly on the floor and rolling somewhere under the counter where he won't be able to reach it later. But he forgets about it just as quickly, feels his nerves ignited and shuddered through his veins and his heart slip up and wedge in his throat as he struggles to articulate coherent words with a dry mouth and a useless, rubbery tongue.

"Wh-what are you doing here?"

A short laugh, fingers drummed over the surface of the counter, the sharp, short nails clicking in a way that booms like gunfire in Lance's suddenly sensitive ears.

Her lips turn up in a sly, forboding smile.

"You were a lot friendlier last time, Mr. McClain. That's not a very polite way to greet a paying customer."

There's no humor in the words, but Detective Sanda doesn't drop her grin. She looks at him in a way that he can easily envision a hundred serrated teeth peeking through her thin lips. She watches him in a reptilian, inhuman manner that reminds him, again, of Nadia's old class pet watching those hamsters in their cage. He stumbles over a quiet apology, but inevitably decides not to offer one. Sanda has set out another sporadic display of random odds and ends to be purchased, and he clears his throat, shakes the nerves from his shoulders, and grasps the scanning gun between trembling fingers, gripping it tightly and jumping when the lasers find the barcode and the computer next to him beeps.

"I told you to leave me alone."

"Am I not allowed to visit this convenience store even when I need something?"

Lance levels her with a look. His jaw tightens. In his hand, he holds a bag of gummy worms. On the counter, there's a mini rubber flashlight shaped like a cat.

"There's another convenience store five minutes from here."

Sanda clicks her tongue. Her fingers crawl forward and Lance can't stop himself from flinching back. He watches her even as his shaking hand drops each of her things into her bag. The barcode has been scratched off from one of the items. It fails to scan twice before he bites off a breath and begins distractedly typing in the UPC.

"I haven't been officially barred from this location," she tells him, "The only person who has an issue with me here is you. And I'm sure you dislike a lot of customers. I highly doubt that your boss would actually ban every single unruly person that you take issue with."

The UPC is incorrect the first time that he punches it in. The computer jeers a short, baritone chirp. His chest feels as though it's sinking in, airless and deflated and flattened to rest heavily on his rib cage and aching lungs. He shakes his head, clearing the numbers from the input bar and typing once again. His heart thumps in his chest, so violent and so deafening that he wonders if Hunk can hear it from outside.

"Most customers aren't stalking me just because they don't like some guy who lives in my apartment complex."

That earns him a single bark of a laugh, dry and humorless as every other sound from Sanda has been before. That sly grin curls up the corners of her lips and the deep creases around her mouth stretch out to accommodate it. Her fingernails clack against the counter, like claws, he thinks. Like a cat considering how easy it might be to swipe at a chirping bird and decapitate it.

"I know who you are, Lance McClain."

He snaps his gaze back to her, his fingers stuttering over the keys of the keyboard and numbly pressing a short series of incorrect numbers. The computer offers him another unhappy beep. He'll have to try typing it again. He wishes that his legs would work properly now, so he might just be able to slip through the door at the edge of the counter and grab another stupid stallion-shaped bottle opener/keychain combo from the rack a few feet away.

Sanda doesn't stop there as he'd hoped so desperately that she would. She leans in closer, close enough that Lance can make out the slightest hints of yellowed discoloration around her eye, at the apple of her cheek, as though she might have been nursing an ugly bruise there just a week or so prior. He swallows deeply, eases back. His leg catches the trash can next to him. It clatters into the shelf of chewing tobacco, shuffling the containers in their slots behind him.

“You think that you’re too good for this town because you weren’t born here. You didn’t inherit it like everyone else who lives here. You don’t belong here. You think that you’re destined for bigger and better things and that anywhere that you go won’t be tainted by the same ugly toxins that you’ve infected this town with—but it’s you. Of course, it’s you. It was those filthy parents of yours that brought death into this town. Your idiot farmhand father, your useless unemployed mother. They thought that they could live here too, but this place, it chewed them up and they didn’t live through it. They left you here to rot in the mess that they left behind—left you here with your whore sister and her gaggle of bastard children. Do you think that a man like Ryou Yamazaki is going to save you from this? From this peaceful town that your parents ruined when they decided to throw their car off of that mountainside? Why do you think that death follows you, Lance McClain? Why do you think that every terrible thing has happened to you if it’s not a reflection of the ugly, ruined person that you are inside?”

Her sharp fingernails dig into his skin as her hand flashes forward and grasps him, just at the swollen, slow-healing wound that Keith left under his sleeve. He yanks himself back, embeds her sharp nails deeper in his skin like thorns buried there, like splinters raised under the surface, tingling uncomfortably. Too tender, too much. He can’t shake her off. His heart pounds wildly, blood rushing in his ears like the winds of a terrible hurricane destroying everything around him.

And in the eye of it, he stands with Sanda. Watching her with shocked, wide eyes. Feeling suddenly muted and too scared to move. Too surprised to tear himself from the bear trap that’s snagged its teeth in his skin.

Sanda digs her fingernails deeper. Around the prod of them, he can feel damp warmness, can smell the copper bite of blood through the aching prickle of his wound reopened. She doesn’t disconnect herself in disgust. She leans in further, nearly climbing onto the counter between them. Her face is inches from his, her silvery eyes focused hard on his face, near enough now that he can make out the milky white of her sclera stained and smudged into the corners of her sharp irises.

Her words spit like embers into the small breadth of space between them. Speckles of her saliva catch on his cheeks, and his chest heaves wide and hard as his brain sputters, drowning in the adrenaline that’s jammed his thoughts.

“Ryou Yamazaki will do nothing but kill. He’s a murderer. He’s a *monster.* You’re followed by tragedy because you’re stupid enough to allow evil like that into your life, into your home, into your *family* . Ryou Yamazaki won’t stop until he’s burned everything that you’ve ever loved to the ground, and your bitch of a sister is too braindead to understand that. Her bastard children will bleed because of that man. He’ll kill all of them. And when you’re used up and useless to him as well, he won’t hesitate to kill you too.”

Lance can’t stop himself from hissing as her fingers continue to dig harder into the tender parts of his skin. He attempts desperately to wrench his arm back, but her grip is ironclad. In the flurry of this struggle, he drops the bottle opener to the floor. Sanda, startled by the clatter of it, wrenches back, her fist caught on his sleeve and tearing it away from the wound, exposing the fresh blood pooled around the twin indentations, swollen and inflamed in vibrant bruises. She bites out a noise, freezes suddenly. Her eyes pin on the sight of his exposed skin.

The two of them, in a sudden moment of overwhelming, smothering silence, stare down at the slowly-fading purple and the pinprick scars, and the clear indication that he’s been bitten by something with fangs —as though Sanda could have any idea what any of this means.

Lance can’t help but think, for some reason, of that bat book that she’d kept in the floorboards of her car. He doesn’t know why it floats to the forefront of his thoughts now, as his breath catches and his heartbeat seems to stall, and Sanda’s eyes grow so wide and wild that he almost fears that she might catapult herself the rest of the way over the counter and strangle him.

Her brows fold together, her mouth falls agape.

She raises frenzied eyes to his and her lips twitch as though she’s speaking but the words are so minuscule that they can’t be heard in human ears.

“Y-you—”

Lance jumps as he hears the back door pop open, but it seems that Sanda, in her sudden horror, hasn’t noticed it. Her fingernails press harder into his skin and Lance offers a quiet, pained noise, finally tears himself away from her, rips his arm from her so violently that her nails track long scratches and drizzled blood from his wrist to his palms and fingers. He stumbles and trips and falls back against the

shelf of chewing tobacco, knocking dozens of cans from their slots onto the floor.

“You’ve invited evil into this town, Lance McClain!” Sanda’s voice now is so shrill and booming that Lance’s ears ring with it. Her single bony finger presses through the air between them, shaking violently as she rests her weight against the counter. She’s crazed now, dark circles under her eyes exacerbated by the glaring light overhead, the dryness of her wrinkled skin and her greasy hair, and the unkempt quality of her tousled clothes suddenly striking Lance as profoundly odd, compared to how put-together she’s always looked in the past. He wouldn’t know at a first glance that she was a proud detective if he were seeing her now for the first time. She’s unraveled so easily here, screaming at him, waving her finger wildly as Hunk draws near and offers Lance a shocked and absolutely mystified expression just a few steps behind her.

“O-okay, ma’am—”

Lance almost feels bad for Hunk, as he comes closer and attempts to rest a calming hand on her shoulder. She immediately knocks it away, swiveling around and facing him and jamming that same accusatory finger into the center of his chest with such force that Hunk flinches at the feeling of it.

Lance winces when he sees it, voice still lodged firmly in his throat, mortified when he spots a small stain of his own blood that she leaves behind. Wondering in horror exactly what Hunk will make of all of this once he’s given a moment to collect his thoughts.

“He’ll kill you too!” She howls, “That fucking monster is going to engulf this entire town in flame! Your friend is consorting with a devil! He’s brought a plague here! It’s the end for all of us unless someone kills it, someone has to understand this! Someone has to recognize exactly what’s going on here and stop it before McClain and Yamazaki destroy this whole place! They’re a disease, they’re evil, they’re monsters, they’re—”

Lance is surprised then, caught completely off-guard, as Hunk grasps her roughly, overpowers her easily in his big hands and shoves her unceremoniously towards the door. She’s still howling as he pushes her through it, as she trips and twists her ankle in a way that makes Lance recoil. And Hunk tells her, in his firm, no-nonsense manager voice that Lance has only heard once before—when a group of kids thought that it would be funny to egg the front windows and leave

graffiti with crude words scrawled on the side of the building—loud and demanding, no-more-taking-shit, no-more-mister-nice-guy, "Ma'am, you need to stay away from this place or I'm calling the police, got it? Now get out of here and have a good day."

Lance almost laughs, but somehow, even as the feeling of it bubbles through him, no sound leaves his mouth. He doesn't feel it inside either, finds that everything internal is dry and numb and cold. He feels disconnected from his emotions in the same way that the ache of his skin where it's met the tobacco shelf is distant, in the same way that he can't feel the sting of his opened wounds in his wrist as much as he's simply aware of the hot blood collecting on the surface of them.

Sanda, too, seems sobered as Hunk turns and slams the door shut. The bells ring feebly overhead. Hunk wrings his hands together and shudders a long, nervous breath.

Sanda stands on the other side of the glass for a few long moments, breathing hard with a wide extension of her chest and shoulders, labored and still-frantic, watching Hunk's receding back for a short moment before flicking her eyes suddenly to Lance. She focuses on him for a daunting period of time that feels like an eternity, before she straightens out, brushes off her messy, lived-in clothes, and stumbles through the parking lot towards wherever she's hidden her familiar black car.

"Holy shit, dude." Hunk's voice draws Lance out of his focus. He's pulled open the counter's side-door and reached out his big hand to offer to Lance, helping him up and brushing him off, and smiling in that very-Hunk-like apologetic way as he cranes his neck to take in the damage to the shelf. "What in the world happened while I was on break? Was that lady some kind of doomsday prepper or something?"

Lance spits a shocked laugh. He scratches at the sore spot where he'd hit his head on the shelf, cheeks suddenly growing warmer as he, too, inspects the various containers of tobacco littering the floor and Sanda's half rung-out selection of items tossed in random directions during their altercation.

"She's a cop, actually," Lance says, surprised when the words come out just as disbelieving as they should, as he feels belatedly, when he thinks about how much she's come unwound since he spoke to her last time. From the fleeting hints of her that he's caught as he walks to work and talks to Shiro at night, he's always imagined that she's

maintained that poised and collected demeanor. That nothing could have shaken her quite this much, or pushed her so far that she'd risk losing her job for the sake of screaming incoherently at him at his work.

He can't help but itch for the need to tell all of his for Shiro, but instead, he cradles his now-irritated wrist in his other hand and allows his nerves to fade as Hunk waves him off and begins cleaning up the floor around them.

"Maybe we should call the station then," Hunk suggests, drawing in a sharp breath as he leans down and begins collecting the cans, "I mean, she's a loose cannon, obviously. She seemed like she was on drugs or something. Honestly, I thought maybe you'd refused to sell Everclear to one of those meth heads again."

Lance shakes his head, scratching lightly at the tingling ache in his wrist and training his eyes on the empty parking lot beyond the front door. Through the glass, he watches the way that the sky scores with lines of orange and pink. How the few cars passing slowly over the blackened asphalt street lurch like the slick backs of black beetles from the clear corners of the glass to the edge of the wall at the other side of it.

He breathes out slowly, withered and tired and already sore despite knowing painfully well that he still needs to work his second shift after this one finishes. Hunk offers to cover the rest of his shift here so he can go home and relax after everything that's happened to him, but he waves him off, thanks him, but reassures him that working will be the best thing for him tonight. He knows that Veronica will ask why he's back so early if he goes home. He doesn't want to worry her further by explaining that Sanda made a scene here, as well. Especially after she went through the trouble of calling her job.

He also knows that Keith should still be asleep back at his own apartment, and that opening the front door while the sun's still shining might hurt him or at least irritate him in a way that Lance isn't particularly interested in bothering him tonight.

He tugs restlessly at his sleeves, mindful, too, of the slowly-healing punctures at the crook of his neck. He's been marked up so much lately that he can't say that he's surprised to be in this position now, unsure of if it's a good thing or not that it was Sanda and not Veronica instead. Or Hunk, even, who surely wouldn't understand what in the world is going on. Who might be the most ill-equipped of anyone even

remotely involved in this situation to handle Lance's mysterious, unexplained wounds.

Lance clears his throat, padding back to the counter and collecting the things that Sanda left behind. He makes slow work of voiding each item, one by one, and slips through the side door of the counter to put each thing back into its designated spot.

Hunk watches him for a while, leans his weight against the counter and chews on the inside of his cheek.

"Hunk," Lance calls out once he's slotted the last item into its empty space on the shelf, "How does your show end? Who does the protagonist end up getting together with?"

Hunk watches him with wide eyes for a long moment. He flicks his gaze away then, distracted by the slow descent of the sun outside and the gradual seeping of darkness into the dusk-stained sky.

"No one," he says, "It has a really bad ending. The protagonist dies."

Sanda's hand shudders around the hilt of her knife, fumbling with the sharpening block as she curses through gritted teeth. She's locked safely inside her kitchen with the blinds drawn shut, shoved aside a growing pile of sticky, unwashed plates and coffee-stained paperwork, worrying the edges of the blade sharper and sharper until inevitably, the spaded tip becomes too frail and breaks off.

She thinks about a creature that would have strong enough teeth not to lose any of them while tearing apart a leathery man like Officer Sendak. Great whites and alligators often leave behind a calling card in the form of a few pearly whites embedded deep in the flesh of their kills. She wonders what kind of animal could be big enough to leave a dent like that in her car without injuring itself. Bears and moose are massive enough to do that sort of damage, but not nearly quick or quiet enough to sneak away undetected. And she can't comprehend why in the world it would leave the carcass of its kill behind in the driver's seat of her car if it wasn't trying to send a message, and how Ryou Yamazaki could have pulled that off when she'd watched him file into his apartment with her own two eyes.

She's developed the pictures that she took that night, roved over them obsessively for any signs of peculiarities among the dark gloss. But there's nothing but Shiro's big hand pressed to Lance's dark cheek. Nothing but their lips meeting over a slow series of hastily snapped photographs. If she were to flip through her new collection like an animated picture book, she could see Ryou's short step forward and his fingers curling in Lance's hair and his dark eyes slipping closed as their lips connected. But she doesn't have the patience for that right now. Under her nails, there's dark caked blood. Lance's, maybe, or residually left from the animal that she tossed from her car the other night.

She still hadn't slept, has barely eaten. Has given herself little to no time to relax between the ups and downs of this mission as she knows that meditating on this might shake her resolve.

She pulls another knife from the small pile that she's amassed on the table. Three handguns, four blades. Gloves, a lock-picking kit. Rope, a ski mask. Night vision goggles. Duct tape. A small bottle of Flunitrazepam. A scalpel and multiple razor heads. Bullets, brass knuckles. She isn't sure which of these things she'll need. Doesn't remember purchasing or pilfering most of them from the confiscation room at the police department. Remembers, achingly, the first time that she caught Officer Sendak perusing the shelves late one night when she should have already gone home, but she'd stopped on her way out to drop off a gravity knife that she'd taken during the body search of a perp that they'd charged earlier in the evening.

He'd met her eyes through the rows where she'd logged the knife in its box. He'd tugged up a toothy grin through the gaps between the boxes.

Five people had reported strange goings-on after that. Sanda had kept her mouth shut about all of it. She hadn't been bothered to wonder what he did with his victims when he drugged them, wasn't even sure what he'd stolen and put in their systems. But that chance meeting had illuminated her on just how easy it would be to steal anything that caught her eye as well. She'd made a small habit of collecting any items that stayed in the system long enough to become irrelevant to the higher-ups. Culminated an impressive arsenal of weaponry in her bedside safe just in case she might have ever needed to protect herself.

Sendak hadn't had any altruistic intentions when he'd raided the endless rows of boxes. He hadn't been thinking of his own safety or protecting others from criminals' wrath.

But she'd protected him with her silence nonetheless, realized that it was more inconvenient to make waves when he'd introduced her to such a novel concept as taking what she needed under the radar of her bosses.

She doesn't feel good about stealing, but she's never had the nerve to feel bad about it either. Numb to all of it, perhaps. Distanced and so normalized to the concept of police corruption when respect for her idiot peers has always been so secondary.

She wonders if ducking her head back then had somehow sealed Sendak's fate. Wonders, perplexed, if perhaps she should have been as invested in that case as she is in this one now, and why she'd simply kept her mouth shut when Iverson had raised a stink about the whole thing.

She doesn't understand her motivations anymore, doesn't know why it seems as though she's been broken out of a decade-long fog just for this purpose, come alive now after many years staying complacent just because, finally, it seems that she's been faced with a case that she can sink her teeth fully into.

A mystery isn't a fun mystery if she knows the answer beforehand. It wasn't surprising that Sendak was drugging locals and dropping them off in remote areas, curiously unhurt, curiously soon after he'd knocked them unconscious.

She knows from many seminars that his behavior was reminiscent of serial killers testing their bounds, that maybe he would have been a smart choice for a suspect had he not been mowed down in the real perp's path.

And she wonders about that, too, because she's sure that Ryou must have heard the rumors. Why would he kill a man who could have easily taken the fall for him? Why wouldn't he have left him alone, of anyone, if Sendak wasn't a threat to him?

She begins sharpening another knife, calmer now, and more focused on scoring the stone in the right direction, mindful of the tip and the thickness of it and aiming for perfection and precision as she goes.

Lance McClain's bite marks had also been smaller and closer together. She'd rifled through her evidence boxes for the photos of the Sendak crime scene. They'd been small too. Deformed, given the state of his body, but more collected than Ryou's wide jaw could have pulled off. Angled severely enough that the fangs would be obvious when he

opened his mouth, and Sanda preens her memory for any strange teeth wedged in Ryou's wide, straight jaw, comes up empty-handed, wonders if perhaps she's been chasing the wrong lead all along. Or if maybe Ryou's apparently ever-evolving cells allow him to retract the sharp canines when he isn't using them.

It sounds like nonsense. Seems like something out of a fairy tale.

She dismisses it.

And she thinks, instead, about those whispers. About the words that she could barely comprehend. There had been a feeling of anger in the night then, mistaken for her own misplaced rage as she'd fretted over her suspension and waited for Ryou to show his face outside of his apartment again. There'd been an uncomfortable sense that she was treading into an animal territory, a bestial sort of heightened anxiety that had risen the hairs on the back of her neck and kept her poised at attention even when her conscious mind had thought that she was alone.

She doesn't understand it even now, why she'd felt that way even before that monster or animal, or whatever it was, pounded against the side of her car. She hasn't taken it in the be checked out either, but the clerk at the sporting goods store, where she'd purchased her sharpening stone, had craned his neck around her and nodded over to it.

"That your car?" he'd asked, thick brow raised and mouth set in a flat, firm line.

She'd nodded, narrowing her eyes up at him as her fingers pinched the edge of her card in her wallet. Flakes of dried blood had flicked from her fingers even then, ignored by her. Unnoticed over the wide, tall counter by a clerk too distracted by the pulverized right end of her otherwise flashy vehicle.

"Deer season, right? Them fuckers are everywhere."

She'd almost laughed at him, but found that even a shallow, manufactured level of joy was completely lost on her at that point. The sound that rattled through her throat, instead, was a small, deadpan hum, and she'd left without much more than that after paying for the sharpening stone. She'd turned heads with the massive crater in her door everywhere that she'd gone. The door itself groaned and creaked and stuck hard into the foundation of it each time that she attempted to pry it open. And when she drove, she could feel a

spitting, cold breeze lapping through the empty cracks and whipping around her ankles.

It's infuriating. Insult to injury. She's been so wrapped up in her mission that she's neglected to make an appointment to have the dent smoothed out, knows with lapping rage that whatever caused that hole in the first place won't even have to pay her back for the massive fee that the mechanics will surely charge her.

But she wonders if maybe it's a sign that she's getting too close, that whatever Ryou is hiding at the center of this finally understands that she's a threat. It was a warning, she thinks, and a show of strength and a preference for violence to advertise to her exactly what this creature is capable of.

Be it Ryou or something else, she knows that she's gotten under someone's skin.

And that's a sign too, to keep going. To keep picking at this case until every hidden part of it is finally illuminated for the town and the whole world to witness.

She grits her teeth, tossing the stone down to the table and admiring the new sharp edges of her knife. It's perfect, just right. The thickness will surely guarantee that it won't splinter if she needs to cut something. The careful, sharp edge will guarantee that it can pierce any flesh that she might need to make contact with.

She isn't sure if a knife alone could work against a creature like Ryou, but she's padded out her arsenal just in case. There's a crucifix and rosary tangled around each other on the far side of the table. She'd talked to the church downtown about holy water, but was given varied answers pertaining to the priest's willingness to bless any water for her. She wonders if she should have cleaned herself up before visiting, wonders if the insistent begging was really worth the end product of a plastic water bottle blessed personally and sitting, now, capped and dented from her tight grip, among the messy papers and dirty plates.

She'd purchased rock salt and wood that she'll later file down to a fine point. She doesn't know what she's up against, isn't sure what lore is fantastical and what might be the truth. Doesn't even know deep down if she'll be able to carry all of this uninhibited, but she'll deal with that when the time comes. She's entering this situation nearly blind. She knows that whatever Ryou Yamazaki has in store for her,

she'll never be prepared to face it until it's too late. But she has to try, has to risk herself in order to protect her neighbors in this town. She can't allow Ryou to slip away, can't allow him to tighten his claws around Lance McClain and sweep him off to this horrible, trapped existence that he might not even be prepared to partake in.

That mutilated wrist, the fear in his eyes. Sanda doesn't know how much he knows yet. She isn't sure if he's already too far gone to save.

But if Lance McClain proves to be entirely too invested, too beguiled by Yamazaki to ever sober up to the truth, she'll allow her resolve and her morals and her decade-long complexes to fade into the backdrop of her conscious mind.

She'll do what's right if she has to.

Even if that means murdering another human who gets in her way.

She tells herself that Lance's mother wouldn't have wanted her son to grow up to be a killer. Tells herself with certainty that this life wasn't what his parents meant to pave out for him when they moved here.

She'd be doing him a favor, striking him down before he allowed himself to slip away. Putting him out of his misery before he made a decision that he'd regret once he came to his senses.

For all she knows, he's been enchanted. For all she can tell, he has no control over the person who he's become anymore.

It doesn't matter in the end, if she can manage to capture Ryou and finally get to the bottom of all of this. She isn't sure if Ryou will take most of his secrets with him to the grave, if at some point he'll realize that he's trapped and there's no getting away this time. And she isn't sure how she would feel if she were to get to the very end of the line and find that there was nothing more to learn about this case. How the emptiness churning inside of her might finally cave in and consume her entirely. How it'll feel, at the other end of this winding trail, past the finish line, to look back and understand with absolution that there's nothing more to pick through. There's no more truth to uncover. There's no more case to invest herself in, and all that she'll be able to do then is move forward.

But she can't worry about that right now. She compartmentalizes it and saves it for a later date.

Her knife glints in the shuddering yellow light hanging above her

kitchen table. Outside, the sun sets slowly behind the thick black skeletons of the trees.

Ryou Yamazaki will return to his apartment early in the morning, just before the sun rises. Lance McClain will sleep until it's time to walk his sister's children to the bus.

She's been given precious few hours to pull everything off, and she plans to take advantage of every second afforded to her.

Tomorrow morning, she'll end all of this.

Tomorrow morning, finally, she's going to have Ryou in her sights, unprotected by Lance's human body. Unhindered by the stipulations of her job title or the constraints of the law.

She's confident that she'll step out from that apartment victorious. She's positive that at the end of everything, she'll hold her blade to Ryou's throat and finally kill him.

No one else will. No one else can.

She's going to finish this.

Even if she dies trying, she won't breathe her final breath until she kills Ryou Yamazaki too.

"I have a lot of research to do tonight, I'm sorry, but I promise I'll come lay with you in the bathroom when I'm done. I'll close the bathroom door so the light doesn't bother you. I'm sorry, I know, but this is important."

The words on their own make coherent sense, thread together to form full sentences that should, by all means, translate thought into words that he can understand without any confusion. The voice that they're spoken in is even and quiet, a soft baritone that sends skitters of tingling warmth from the roots of his hair down the back of his neck, fizzling like bubbles rising in a boiling pot within his chest. Sensation, smell and taste. Scurrying in the walls.

The feeling of artificial light humming at the backs of his eyes. Distractions that muddy the message before it reaches his brain, confuses any rebuttal that he might offer in response. He feels for a moment a monumental frustration wrack through him, an output of nervous energy clawing at the inside of his throat and struggling not to tumble out. He wants to tell Shiro that he can sleep under the burning lights currently hissing overhead. He wants to turn his eyes up to them and stare directly, to prove himself as a creature that can withstand discomfort. To prove to Shiro, standing before him now with that familiar soft smile, that he isn't a child that needs to be coddled and he isn't afraid of spending one single night uncomfortably if that means not being separated and left alone. Locked away—he scoffs—like some kind of unruly housepet that gets anxious when company comes over.

But those words catch too in his throat, and his frustration boils over. And the creatures in the walls scratch and smell like sweet blood and they're too warm and the world is still too alive, and the sun through the cracks in the curled edges of the adhesive on the windows is too hot and too close and the bathroom is cool and dark and comfortable.

He resigns himself to being good. Allows Shiro to press a gentle kiss to his forehead, tipping up his head in a quiet invitation for lips to grace lips and Shiro's big hand to thread through his hair.

He's tired anyway. The bathroom feels welcoming and perfectly black when Shiro shuts the door behind him. And the tub, dressed with the softest blankets and fluffiest pillows, it's encased and closed in. He feels petty when he tries not to enjoy the feeling of lying down inside of it.

Through the door, he can hear Shiro's slow pulse beating rhythmically. He can hear the lurching of blood crawling through his veins. And the scratch of his pen on paper, that map crinkling, their few belongings collected and placed carefully in shiny black plastic bags. The same ones that Shiro wrapped the corpse of that man in, months ago, when he'd found him crumpled on the side of the road in

the wake of that clumsy, drunk driver who left him to die. Bleeding out and already dead.

Perfect pickings, guilt-free food.

It feels like years have passed since that night. He feels as though for the first time in his existence, he's aged and grown and evolved into a different creature entirely.

He runs a hand from the furthest spot of his exposed thigh that he can reach laying down, ghosts his fingers over his skin and drags up the thin edge of his t-shirt along their path. Over the concave dip of his hip into his flattened belly, over an abdomen that he knows would pulse and pop with the thrumming organs beneath, that would feel alive in a human being. He envisions again how it had felt to touch Lance days ago, to press fingers to the quivering life of him and feel, for a moment, as though his pulse were living inside of Keith instead. He draws in a long breath, nearly coughs at the uncomfortable feeling of oxygen expanding his lungs. Trembles through a short series of gasps until he remembers how to ease the air in and out. His eyes concentrate on a thick crack embedded in the ceiling over the tub, water-worn and dry-rotted. He breathes, in and out and in and out, and thumps his fingers against his still chest in time with Shiro's pulse outside of the door.

He's living, for a short, private window of time. He imagines what it might feel like to be hungry and to eat human food. That disgusting sticky mess of things that smell too sweet and feel dewy at the back of his throat, even from across the room. He thinks of the crunch of bone in his teeth and the stringy pull of flesh and tendons. He imagines what it might feel like to be drunk. He thinks of how it might feel to be warm—really warm, thriving, *human warm* —without the assistance of hot baths and thick blankets. Not just stealing a vicarious kind of heat for as long as he's allowed to steal it from the closest living thing, but emanating heat. Creating hot energy with the push of blood through his dead veins and the tug of breath in his lungs, and the effort exerted by humans to move and laugh and sit as still as a human can be. Still popping like live electricity even at their quietest. Still deafening and distracting and delicious when they're trying so hard to be still.

His eyes slide closed. He imagines ever finding a blackness as dark as the backs of his own eyelids. Imagines, for a moment, how it might feel to be a terrified organic creature in a sea of endless dark.

His breath hitches, his fingers tap harder. His hand on his belly pushes down, emulating that stomach-drop feeling that he's read about in books, that he's seen written on Shiro and Lance's faces, that he's always envisioned when dropping from high places and feeling nothing but the wind pushing back his hair.

Shiro, outside, turns a page of his notebook, pauses for a short moment before he begins to write again.

Keith imagines the way that the paper might feel between his fingers, imagines smelling a person and finding nothing there but shampoo and the bitter stink of cigarette smoke. Imagines how it might feel not to hear the pattering of hearts. To be dumb and deaf and blind to anything but the surface stimuli, meeting people, not as food, but just people. Just someone else, just like him.

Equals, on even ground. Not a hunter and a hunted creature. Not predator and prey.

Himself, with a pulse and breath and skin warm enough that no one recoils when they touch him for the first time. Not a corpse or a mystery or a creature deserving of terror and scorn.

A human, afraid of the unknown. Afraid of the dark, maybe, of his own mortality.

Human, like Lance. Like Shiro used to be.

He can't stop himself from wondering if everything would be better if he were normal. Can't stop himself from fantasizing about a universe where he could meet both of them on better terms. He'd drink coffee with spoonfuls of sugar and small plastic containers of cream, light brown and fragrant as Lance drinks his in the morning. He'd sink his teeth into those rubbery fast food burgers that Shiro eats guiltily while they're on the road.

He'd touch Lance and Shiro and his warmth would meet their warmth. He'd see them as blurry inkblot people, as humans see humans, without the fine details of their pores or each delicate hair. Without finding himself distracted by the sound of their breathing and their

gentle pulses and the smell of their blood so ripe and hot and delicious.

He wouldn't burden Shiro with the task of taking care of him. He wouldn’t watch for long years in agony as this life slowly drained the joy from Lance’s smile.

It doesn’t change anything, to yearn for this sort of life, to weigh himself down with his guilt and insecurity, alone, without Shiro here to distract him with his warmth. When he stops breathing, his lungs feel tired relief. The faux pulse of his fingers dies away. He’s still and unmoving and the dark is still easy to pick through when he opens his eyes.

He isn’t conjured magically into a person just because he wishes for it. Like Cinderella, he thinks, he’s tragically transformed back into his gown of filthy rags at the end of the night.

And Shiro is still alive outside of the door because of him. Lance, across the courtyard in his own apartment, only met both of them because of this condition.

He doesn’t know why he longs to be different than he is, when it’s the only thing that’s made his life now possible. He doesn’t know why it’s so important to him that maybe someday he’ll need to breathe.

He wonders why Lance asked him about insecurity those days ago, wonders if Lance could read a weakness inside of him that he’s spent decades burying beneath every protective layer scabbed over his tender heart.

He wonders if it’s okay to want Lance, someone with so much promise and potential if only they’d leave him alone. He wonders if it’s okay to want anything as a creature that surely shouldn’t exist at all.

But the want changes nothing about their situation.

Regardless, sleep finds him eventually.

Alone in a dark bathroom, wrapped in numerous blankets, dreaming for a brief respite about a universe that might exist in the infinite possibilities where he could be happy and human and not so alone as he’s so alone now.

He’s awoken some short hours later, startled into awareness by the sound of yelling and the smell of freshly spilled blood.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

> **Content Warning**: This chapter contains themes that may be upsetting to some readers, including graphic depictions of violence, violent imagery, minor character death, and implied/ potential major character death. If any of the listed themes are upsetting to you, it's recommended that you wait, at least, until chapter 28 is published to move forward.

In his dream, Lance is standing at the eye of a swirling black tornado, head craned back and neck exposed to the whipping winds curled like writhing snakes around him. He's peering with squinted eyes through the pinhole at the distant mouth, at the gray clouds and the empty gaps of onyx sky through them. Wondering, startlingly calm, exactly how long he might be able to dither here at the center of all of the calamity without taking a single step in any direction.

He can see clearly that stepping into the winds will tear him apart. He knows that the gentle breeze licking at his hair and chilling his face and nose would turn violent if he were to commit to escaping from this. But he also knows that burying underground will do nothing but suffocate him, that the stony dirt beneath his shoes would crack his nails and tear his skin, and that he'd be dead before he ever breached air on the other side, in safety. He also knows that there's no climbing to the top. There's nothing to grab onto, nothing to hold and claw against in pursuit of that narrowing eye into the oasis of a clear sky. He's trapped here, finding that there's no fight left in him to push forward.

Maybe there never was.

Maybe he really wasn't ever committed to clawing himself from this wretched trap that he was born in.

Fated, instead, to rot away in his own indecision and apathy long before the storm is fated to pass.

There's no resolution to this dream and no ghostly voice that calls out to him and shakes him into coherence. There are no pale hands shoved through the heavy bales of wind to grasp his own and pull him through. It's just Lance in a deafening howl of wind crashing together and thunder shattering in the air. With wide eyes and heavy limbs, he

watches the violent end of his surrounding world without the ability or the bravery to do much of anything to stop it.

Stalled in uncertainty. Weighed down by his own overwhelming failure to launch himself from the bowels of this dying town into a life that might be more forgiving than this.

Trapped for the extent of a dream and perhaps even forever in the eye of a terrible storm.

Lance doesn't awaken as a hero, but most people don't, he supposes. He does, however, nod into coherence with a throbbing headache just behind his eye sockets, feeling despondent and desperate to be reunited with sleep without the ability to slip comfortably back into it. His bandaged wrist peeks out through the corner of his sleeve, stark white on blue sheets and thankfully clean of any blood stains after Sanda tore open the scabs yesterday. It's devoid of its previous ache, feeling suddenly brand new and functional enough that he wonders if Shiro was right. If maybe his body is finally getting used to the constant assault of Keith's fangs embedded in his skin and over time, he'll find himself healing quicker and quicker until it really doesn't affect him at all.

Maybe, too, without Sanda causing a scene and aggravating his wounds, he'd be allowed to get better faster. Maybe, if it weren't for her nails yesterday, he would have felt better before the end of his shift and he wouldn't have been forced to change the bandages nearly three times when he mopped the floors at the middle school before spending an embarrassing thirty wasted minutes with a paper towel filled with ice from the break room nursed against his skin.

And he thinks about Sanda, too, the feral glimmer in her eye and the wild rattle of her screaming and the helpless way that she grasped at him and held him as though she might be able to shake him out of some kind of fugue. He thinks about her silvery irises dilated by growing voids of pupils. How she'd been panicked and reduced back to a version of humanity nearly ten evolutions ago: frantic, driven by that fear. Propelled forward only by the belief that whatever she did yesterday was of the highest consequence, and he thinks that she must have failed. Must have slinked off with her tail between her legs and

kept plotting. He doesn't know what she has in store for him now, what might be waiting for him in a murky future. And why, as she'd held him and hurt him and shaken him, she'd seemed so intent that he just needed to wake up.

He was wide awake then, more aware and concentrated in the reality of the world around both of them than he'd ever been here before. Lance thinks about himself in her fingers as he thinks about standing still in the eye of that tornado. Thinks about being in the belly of a large glass bottle like a model ship, and about Nadia's drawing and the snow piled high outside, and cleaning Shiro's tracked droplets of scattered crimson from the parking lot what feels now as though it might have happened decades ago.

The world is large and loud and bewildering and it whips past him just as the body of the wind had constricted him in sleep. Veronica keeps a silly book about dream meanings sitting on a shelf in the living room, and as he scratches idly at his bandage and rolls over to stare unseeingly up at the orange swatches of light stained on his cracked bedroom ceiling, he wonders if he'll find the strength before the kids wake up to sneak out there and thumb through it.

A look at the clock rested on his bedside table tells him that he has twenty minutes left to pull himself out of bed and get ready for the morning. He takes a few moments to roll around and grope under his blankets and pillows in search of his cell phone. When he finds it, it's overheated and nearly dead. The battery hesitates just at three percent, and he draws in a deep breath, cursing "Yesterday Lance" for not having the foresight to plug it in before he tossed himself down on his mattress and promptly passed out for the next few hours. He's still tired, still itching for the opportunity to sleep again when he comes home from work tonight. But he stays awake just to check the few notifications that have popped up on his screen, feeling suddenly guilty when he reads through the three messages that Hunk sent him while he was busy cleaning the middle school last night.

Hunk 12:15 A.M. *: Hey buddy, how's your arm? Pretty crazy what happened at work, right?*

Hunk 1:23 A.M.: *By the way, when are you off next? We haven't hung out in a while, so you should come over and play video games again. I got*

some new ones since the last time you stopped by.

Hunk 1:50 A.M. *: I know you're busy tonight, so it's cool if you just wanna talk about it at work tomorrow. I gotta open in the morning so I'm gonna head to bed, but let me know, dude! I miss you.*

Lance scrubs a hand over his face, typing and re-typing a response twice before he sighs in frustration and tosses his phone to the side. He'll worry about being articulate later. Maybe he really will wait until they're working together tonight to discuss it. He might as well make a point of spending as much time as he can with the people who he'll leave behind. He might not be able to tell Hunk what's going on, but at the very least, he'll create some better, more recent memories together that both of them can look back on fondly once he's gone.

It still makes him feel bad. His stomach growls unhappily, his head aches. He just wants to go back to sleep.

But he pushes himself up and scratches a hand through his hair instead. He needs a shower. He needs to brush his teeth.

Everything else can wait until later, after he's led the kids to the bus and taken a well-deserved nap. He'll talk to Veronica more. He'll hang out with Hunk. He'll tell Shiro and Keith all about the disturbing situation that unfolded with Sanda yesterday, and they'll plan accordingly. For now, he collects himself and mentally tallies up his tasks for the morning, sliding everything else back and away from the forefront of his thoughts. Shower, teeth, kids, breakfast, bus.

He grabs his book bag from its resting place by the door. He's kept most of his things collected inside of it over the weeks, as he's spent his time split evenly between his apartment and Shiro's. It's been easier this way, to live out of this bag. Even his phone charger is buried somewhere inside of it, which he remembers now, as he opens his bedroom door and tiptoes carefully down the hall, was the exact reason why he wasn't willing to fumble through the contents last night just so he could plug his phone in before he went to sleep.

He'll worry about that later, too. It's not like Shiro or Keith have phones to call him from. It's not like either of them will be awake right now, with the sun risen so high and bright in the gray morning sky.

It's still and serene and quiet in the apartment as he crosses the short distance from his bedroom to the bathroom, mindful of the toys scattered about the floor and stepping over them carefully. The bathroom light hums overhead once he flips it on, closing the door gently behind him and flipping the lock. His headache migrates from his eye sockets to the center of his forehead as he bends down, pulling the zipper of his bag around its tracks and digging inside of it until he finds everything that he's looking for.

His shampoo and conditioner, his face wash and moisturizer. His toothbrush and toothpaste and a half-empty container of floss. He sets everything in their usual spots, pauses for a short moment to inspect his reflection under the harsh, yellow bathroom light in the dirty, toothpaste-speckled mirror.

Through those little spots, a layer of thin dust, and a few long, swiped fingerprints, he studies the dark circles hollowed under his eyes and the pallidness of his skin, the hollow steep of his cheekbones where his baby fat has just recently begun to ebb away. His hair is just a little greasy now, unwashed for a couple of stressful days. His skin is dry and wind-burned. He makes a mental note to apply more moisturizer before he goes to bed. He reminds himself to drink more water throughout the day to supplement his lack of restedness.

He swivels his container of moisturizer around on the counter, tipping his head to the side and dropping it to rest on his shoulder. He reads lazily over the label and thinks about Keith. About the two of them wrapped in the fog in a dark and damp, cramped bathroom. He thinks about Keith peering at him with black eyes from between his knees, about Shiro's gentle touches later on. About the three of them cloaked in darkness for an eternity that today feels distant and surreal.

It's difficult, existing in one place that feels a universe away from the double life that he's been leading over the last couple of months, to imagine these two worlds colliding into one intermingled timeline. He won't be daytime Lance and nighttime Lance in just a few shorts weeks, won't find himself constantly quartered between an alternative self and whoever he's forced to be at the current moment. He feels alien even to himself, feels suddenly as though he's nothing but a small series of thoughts existing in a body that moves separately from his subconscious. As though perhaps he's viewed his entire life until this point projected just in front of his eyes and that only at night, only when he finds himself among Shiro and Keith, he's allowed to finally wake up.

And he's spent so much time over the last few months ruminating in exactly how it feels to be shaken from that sleep. He doesn't know why he's focused so much attention on it, why it matters so much to finally be conscious when he's spent so much of his life so far half-awake. But he finds himself obsessively picking through it nonetheless, considering how it might feel if someone were to ask him about it, which words he'd use to explain it. Feels it buried like thorns in the depths of his chest and wants nothing more than to take the time to pick each one out slowly, carefully, and to finally find the proper opportunity to talk about it.

And he wonders if Shiro, too, at some point experienced this waking sleep. If maybe they have that in common, as men who traipsed through life under a perpetual fog and might have, at some point, thought that everyone else did as well. Welcomed by only the brief glimpses of the warm sun through gray clouds and heat sizzling in melting snow. Spellbound by their own complacency until Keith crashed into their lives and introduced them to the concept of living graciously. Of holding what they want and owning it. Of finding something that made them happy and spending the rest of their days protecting it.

He feels purpose now, as he's never felt purpose before. Feels suddenly invigorated and fully coherent as he sets down the tub of moisturizer and pulls his shirt over his head.

The shower, once he undresses fully and steps inside, is warm as firm sputters of water beat down on his tired, sore muscles. His exposed arm, cleared of the old bandages and allowed to breathe and be rinsed off, feels less irritated than it did just yesterday. He inspects the swelling through the fog and the water's spray, squints and holds his wrist closer to his face to pick apart the way that the twin punctures are more visible now that the flesh around them is less puffy. There are tiny scratches, scuffed crescents deeply indented and angry red around the edges. It takes him a moment to realize that they're left over from Sanda's nails yesterday, isn't sure why suddenly he feels indignant that she'd dare mark him up over Keith's signature, as though clumsily taking a fat, black marker and crossing out his neatly-scrawled name. And he thinks about that too, how frantic she'd been, how desperately she'd wailed at him.

She'd held him roughly and paid no mind to how much pain she'd put him in. She'd accused him of purposefully causing every negative thing that's ever happened to him, put the onus on him to "fix things" when he knows deep down that he couldn't even begin to if he wanted

to. But there'd been a sense to her then, as she'd shaken and screamed and demanded justice, a sense that told him that she was afraid. That she was trying to force some reason into him. That she thought, so misled, so misguided, that he still wasn't totally aware of what he'd indebted himself to. Who he'd been spending his time with. Where he was planning to go from here.

He isn't sure why it reminds him so much of his teachers and peers back in grade school, the adults who stared at him in town, the people just at the fringes of his life who had dithered when they wanted to reach out, but inevitably left him to shoulder the burden of that old tragedy alone. Sanda, he thinks, might have been trying to save him. But it was too late and too little and she'd been far too unpracticed and unkind.

And wrong, too, when he thinks about it. Stupid enough to believe that Shiro and Keith could be anything but the first bright light to shine on his life since his parents died and left him behind here. She'd been wrong when she'd said that Shiro was a monster, that he brought death with him, that he was anything but a person trying to make the best of the hand that he'd been given.

And Keith, too… He still isn't sure how to wrap his head around it. He doesn't think that the pursuit of survival is selfish. He thinks that, maybe, it's the most human thing about Keith, wanting to thrive.

Sanda is too distant to understand it, lacking empathy of the right caliber to ever twist her thoughts around it just right. She isn't capable of grasping just how hard Keith and Shiro both are trying. She couldn't ever understand that they have just as much of a right to live in this world as anyone else who shares it with them.

He has a feeling that she wouldn't want to get it, even if he sat her down and explained it to her. Even if she met Keith and experienced his guarded loneliness firsthand. Sanda, from what he's collected about her, isn't exactly the kind of person to think hard about a person before making her own conclusions. She isn't the sort of woman to whom matronly empathy comes naturally.

But even still, he can't stop himself from feeling sorry for her. From mourning, for a brief moment, all of the wasted time and desperate struggling that she's funneled into this investigation and how terribly he knows that she's going to suffer in frustration when the three of them go away. He knows that putting so much of herself into a case with no real conclusion wouldn't be easy for anyone, and he doesn't

know why that makes him feel bad. As though some alternate version of himself would actually be willing to spill everything out of pity, just to make Sanda, of all people, feel better.

But he's afraid, too, when he thinks about her going after Veronica further down the line, taking all of that same frustration and anger out on her and the kids. He's scared that he might have messed things up to such an unmendable extreme that his family won't be able to survive here without him. Sanda is definitely dangerous and now he knows that she's not above causing a scene.

But she makes him sad, too, when he allows himself to think about it, when he's alone now and she isn't watching him, and he's afforded the opportunity to mull over the bad taste that she leaves in his mouth every time that she shows her face. It's pity, under layers of dislike. It's the realization that he'll leave her broken and directionless when he disappears and threads no loose ends for her to follow.

He isn't confident that a person as unraveled as Sanda has become will be able to move on from this. She might spend the rest of her life hunting for them, chasing their ghosts, and she might even die alone and fretful and eternally encapsulated in her grief and confusion and her hopeless need to understand them, to grasp them in her fingers, to finally hold them responsible for everything that she believes that they've done.

To learn the well-guarded truth that it isn't Shiro who is the monster. It isn't Ryou Yamazaki who she's been tailing all this time.

But that the real killer, the real danger has been lurking in the shadows just beyond her reach for months now, has watched her flounder and struggle and give chase, but he's done nothing to bring his own existence to the forefront.

Lance doesn't know what Sanda would do when faced with the discovery that something that Keith is real. He isn't sure how she'd handle such an undeniable refute to any truth that she might have been established on the foundation of. Many people, he knows, have lived an entire lifetime and never learned the truth of what goes bump in the dark. He doesn't know why the acceptance of Keith came so naturally to him, but he suspects that it wouldn't for Sanda.

But it's a funny thought nonetheless, imagining a distant, alternate universe in which Keith reveals himself to be the monster that he is just before they flee to better, sunnier places. Lance can almost

imagine the look of terror and absolute panic on her face, the realization that she's pegged Shiro for a multitude of crimes that he didn't, in fact, commit. That she's shoved so much time and effort into harassing both of them while Keith existed just outside of her peripherals.

It's not anything that Lance could see happening in the realm of reality, but it makes him feel a lot better about the cuts that she's left on his arm anyway.

He finishes his shower and steps out into the dewy bathroom, reaching forward and blindly grasping his towel on the rack, rubbing it furiously over his wet hair and sliding it over his body to clean off the droplets collected there. He sneaks a brief peek at the bathroom door, paranoid for a moment or perhaps just excited, perhaps just hoping that he might look up and find a specific someone standing there, still and watching him. But he knows that Keith couldn't be here, wouldn't be capable of slipping through the threshold of his window or any of the doors without an invitation. He isn't sure what might happen if he did so without permission, but there's always been a sense that it definitely wouldn't be good. That Lance would regret asking only moments after he did so, if he were to, and so he's allowed it to remain a mystery instead.

There are many things that he still doesn't know or understand about Shiro and Keith, and he thinks, as he dresses himself again, that he'll surely get to the bottom of everything in time. Forever isn't a length that can be determined or scaled in easily-understood terms, really. He thinks about a lesson that Hunk taught him months ago, about how many people, in terms of billions of dollars, don't understand exactly how much money that really is. As humans, they're fated to measure things in smaller, manageable sections. Or in an endless nebulous amount that the end of which could never be reached.

Most young people in their position would regard a thousand dollars with the same mystified amazement as they'd see in a million or a billion. Many people would consider that amount to be so vast and plentiful that they wouldn't be able to wrap their heads around it if they were ever offered that much. Some people, perhaps, would blow through it as though it would never run out. But that's the difference between Hunk's fun fact and Lance's reality. A billion is finite. There's a last dollar. There's a point at the end of that winding line that once reached, it's gone for good. But forever, in that same way, just feels like a very, very long time. Like a still-finite measurement that'll give way eventually to death, someday. Not just days and days and weeks

and decades passed. Not the three of them stayed the same through multiple centuries until, perhaps, they're even the final beings left alive on Earth.

Eternity is immeasurable to Lance right now, but it still feels like maybe not even enough time to learn and do everything that he wants to. And it's an exciting prospect to consider, a strange and unique opportunity that he wonders if he'd be a fool to turn down.

But he thinks about movies that he's watched in the past—that scene *Highlander* that he never understood, when the protagonist decided that dying was better. That ending his life early was smarter than existing for an eternity in misery, watching his family and loved ones grow older and die away, thinking ahead in ways that Lance still can't quite bring himself to comprehend. Shiro is there now, and Lance doesn't know for sure if he always was and just didn't care. But he'd warned Lance, too, that any connections that he has in life will fizzle out eventually, sooner, even, than he might be able to predict.

He's familiar with death and loss. He knows exactly how it feels to exist long after a loved one has disappeared from his timeline. It's an eternal ache, a perpetual stain at the back of his heart that trills with the need to reunite with them. He doesn't know how he'll react one day in the future when he realizes that even his nephews' great-grandchildren have gotten old enough to pass away. When he learns with great agony that everyone who once knew Lance McClain is gone now, and this life of his, this suddenly temporary identity, has melted away to obscurity.

He shoves those thoughts into the back of his mind, wondering, frustrated, why his brain is so determined to torture him today. He applies his moisturizer and lotion, brushes his teeth and styles his hair in some semblance of an acceptable style. And he watches himself in the mirror again, catches his own tired eyes and wonders if immortality will chase away the dark circles seemingly permanently shadowed underneath them. He wraps bandages that he pulls from the first aid kit under the sink around his wrist, observing the way that light pressure swims light into the faded, yellowed purple edges of the wound. How Sanda's faint fingernail scratches sit angry and deep red at the surface of everything, cornered at the forefront of this worries. Outlined in violent scarlet in the center of the scars that Keith's given him.

He's a little worse for wear right now, he knows. This is, hopefully, the extended dark just before the sun begins to rise.

He sighs, collecting his things back inside of his book bag and venturing down the hall to his bedroom. The clock informs him that he needs to wake up the kids in five minutes, and he takes this opportunity to pull on some outside-appropriate clothing and slip on his socks, pocketing his near-dead phone and glancing around his room at all of his things. He isn't sure what Veronica did with that notebook of his, but it isn't sitting back in its spot on the bedside table. He picks through his book bag and discards a few shirts and pajama bottoms that he needs to wash later and replaces them with a fresh set that he might be able to dress in tonight when he visits Shiro and Keith again. There's not much else to do, he finds, but the time runs itself out as he inspects his things, thinking idly about everything that he might leave behind and what he'll take with him, and wondering if maybe it's better to slip away without seeming as though he's been planning it all along.

He can buy new clothes, he knows. He can shop around with Shiro for a dresser and a bed and different posters to hang on the walls. He isn't sure why he does so, but without thinking, he plucks a framed photo of himself, Veronica, and the kids from the bedside table and tucks it safely inside of his bag. He thinks that maybe he can hide it now and no one will even know that it's missing when he leaves. It's smarter that way, he thinks. To begin packing early on, so any missing items won't catch attention once Veronica and the kids are used to them being gone.

He wonders if he might be able to sneak a few pictures of his parents from the photo album in the living room, but decides to save that for a different day. Right now, the clock tells him that it's time to get moving, and he doesn't even think about how silly it is to slide his bag over his shoulders and carry it with him as he goes. Anymore, practically living out of it, it's become so natural just to hoist it on his back and lug it everywhere that he isn't even sure if he'd walk right without the weight of it steadying him.

He moves quietly into the hall and over the next few minutes, he wakes up the kids and corrals them into the kitchen for breakfast. Veronica doesn't emerge from her bedroom until fifteen minutes later, exhausted with severely hilarious bedhead as Lance is sliding pancakes on each of the kids' plates from a dented old frying pan that's so old now that even the stick-resistant paint has eroded away. Nadia is telling him excitedly about a class project that they're doing with tadpoles, explaining to him that they've been logging the growth of the tiny creatures every morning at the beginning of class, and that her teacher has been snapping photos of the terrarium once per week

that they can compare at the end of the year. She talks to him about the swimmers and how they're so small now that she has to use a magnifying glass to see them. She says that they'll grow big and strong soon, faster than a human would. Her class is going to set them loose in the pond behind the grade school once it becomes warm enough for them to survive the summer.

Lance isn't positive how long the frog life cycle lasts, but he hums his understanding as she speaks to him, raises his eyebrows and offers Veronica a sleepy exchange of smiles as she lowers herself into the empty seat between the boys.

"Late night?" he asks her, as though he actually wants to know what she's been getting up to. She levels a heavy breath, rubbing her eyes under her glasses with her sleeve pulled over her palm.

"Silvio's class is learning common core math," she tells him.

He nods thoughtfully, thinking of many late nights in the past spent suffering over seemingly impossible homework problems with Veronica as well. He pours more batter in the pan, foregoing any invitation to eat or questions about whether or not Veronica is even hungry before simply assuming that she'll have a plate as well.

The coffee maker across the counter gurgles and sputters. He tugs the pitcher from the center of it and pours a mug halfway filled with it, resting it on the counter for a moment as he grabs the milk from the fridge and the sugar from the cabinet and mixes both in.

She offers him a lazy half-smile as he passes her the mug. Nadia drizzles so much syrup over her pancakes that they seem almost more like an amber-colored soup. He plucks the container from her hands without a word, offering her a sardonic smile when she snaps her angry eyes up at him as though she's going to complain. Diverting her attention moments later back to her food as Lance considers taking the plate from her and tipping the extra syrup down the sink.

He decides against it, distracting himself from the mess that she's making with finishing the pancakes. Veronica eats hers with minimal dressings once he's done. A small dot of syrup, none of the frozen fruit that he's thawed out and set in a bowl at the center of the table. Dry pancakes glazed lightly. She doesn't complain, and he doesn't bring it up.

He's set his bag by the door temporarily, settled himself in the final empty seat, nursing a hot mug of coffee and no breakfast of his own as

he watches each of them groggily finishing their meals.

“I thought maybe you’d gone out again last night.”

It’s belated and seemingly out of nowhere, and Veronica twitches at the words, the sound of his voice filling the quiet, the gentle accusation that both of them allow to simmer between them before either of them decides how aggressive this conversation is going to become. She smiles crookedly a moment later, taking a long drink of her coffee before turning her eyes up to meet his.

“You know I wouldn’t leave the kids alone for that.”

He threads his fingers through his still-damp hair, turning his eyes to the yellow sun casting bright scores of light through the gaps in the apartment buildings through the sliding glass door.

“I guess you’re right,” he says, “But that doesn’t mean that you can’t invite someone over here. I mean, I’ve invited Ryou over, so what’s stopping you?”

Veronica’s lips press together in a flat line. She turns her head back down to her half-eaten pancakes and pushes her glasses further up the bridge of her nose. She seems to be chewing on the idea that maybe he’s offering a treaty now, backing down from perhaps the one final uncomfortable secret still wedged between them, and wondering if maybe this means that he’s leaving sooner than she thought.

And he is, of course. He finds that this morning, he wants nothing more than to finally clear the air before very, very soon, he’s gone forever.

Give or take a week, Shiro had told him. Pigeon is efficient, but mail, reliably and frustratingly, takes time.

Veronica sighs, forking a piece of pancake and raising it to her lips. Syrup strings off from the edge of it, pooling in a small, sticky puddle on the white surface of her plate.

“That’s true,” she tells him tiredly, but notably perkier than she was just moments ago, “Maybe I’ll have her over for dinner some time. Do you think you and Ryou can request off and maybe… we could do little get-together?”

Lance bites the inside of his lip, smiling despite himself, feeling the churning of nerves and guilt and wistful regret curdling the hot coffee

in his belly. He nods then, turning his eyes to the sliding glass door once again, distracting himself with the golden strands of light illuminating the water stains and the fingerprints on the glass.

“I think that would be nice, yeah. I’ll ask Ryou when he’s off again.”

Time passes, and the kids leave them alone to go brush their teeth and get dressed. Lance leads Nadia first to the sink to wash the syrup from her hands and face before she gets it stuck in her hair, but once he’s finished and she wanders through the hall as well, he settles himself back at the table and sits in silence across from Veronica, still picking at her unfinished breakfast.

“You know,” Veronica says then, distractedly with subtle discomfort as the prongs of her fork tap into the ceramic of her plate, “She works at the police office, my girlfriend. She, uh… she told me that they suspended that Detective—Sandra or Sanda or whatever. Apparently, a few of the other detectives wanted to organize some kind of intervention to get her to check herself into a mental health facility, but… legally, they can’t really make someone do anything if they haven’t broken the law yet. They’re worried about her though, I guess she’s been acting erratically for some time. Ac—m-my girlfriend, she says uh, that… Sanda had a giant picture of your boyfriend hung up in her office.”

She laughs then, dry and tired with the clicking of her fork filling the cracked spaces left between each breath.

“She’s out of her mind, that woman. But you have to be careful, too. She might not be a detective right now, but, you know… that might make her reckless. I’ve seen her around town, I know she didn’t take their suggestion and actually commit herself somewhere.”

Lance feels his wrist tingle, aching along the indentations in his skin like dozens of tiny bugs embedding their teeth there. He scratches at the bandage under the table, forcing his expression to stay even as he lifts a single hand back to his mug and raises it to his lips. It’s room temperature now, oversweet with too little milk. The brand is cheap and it tastes muddier than even the stuff that Shiro serves while they’re standing on his balcony in the mornings.

He takes in the sight of Veronica’s messy hair and her smudged glasses and the tired, puffy edges of her pink-rimmed eyes. And how she chews on the inside of her cheek as her gaze stays pinned on the smashed mixture of pancake and syrup that she’s currently concocting

on her plate.

He slides a hand across the table and rests his fingers atop her free hand, fisted around itself next to her food. She flicks her eyes up to him and widens them in the face of his resigned smile, seems suddenly smaller and more fragile than she's ever been before. Seems, for the first time, as though Lance is meeting her as a tired woman bridled with unmatched responsibility far too young, in place of the godlike effigy of a distant, larger than life older sister that she always felt like when he was a kid.

For many years, Veronica was the hero who kept him out of foster care. For so much time, she was a soldier made of stone. Untouchable and unshakable and stronger than anyone who Lance had ever met before her.

But she's scared now and she's sad because she knows what's going to happen. He runs his thumb gently over the warm surface of her hand. He presses his lips together, scrunches his eyebrows, and finds that for a moment, all of the appreciation and love and the endless apologies that he wants to say to her are bunched too tightly in his throat.

Instead, wetly, he tells her, "I'm going to miss you a lot, Veronica. I love you."

She drops her fork with a light clatter against her plate, lifting her hand swiftly to her face and rubbing at her eyes under her glasses. Her fingers turn up as her hand swivels around to thread together with his. She shakes for a short moment, wracked as though sobbing, and turns her eyes to him through the cage of her fingers, struggling to smile.

"I love you too," she says quietly, "I-it's not going to be the same without you, but… I—I'm happy, I am, I know… I know that you're going to be so much happier once you're away from here."

Time ebbs on. It's not goodbye just yet, but it's a small post-it left stuck on an almost conversation, as though they've made a footnote in the novel of their lives together so far, just pages before the final words. Reminding themselves with bright, sticky paper to return to this place before it's over and read these words over again.

Lance doesn't want this to be the end just as much as he doesn't want to stay stunted here forever. Caught between these two versions of his life, he finds that there's no way to step through the violent, windy walls of this tornado unscathed. This part, he finds, is the part that's going to hurt the most.

But he tucks it away for later. In a week, maybe, he'll know all of the right words to say.

For now, the kids are waiting by the door, dressed in their coats and their tiny book bags when Lance rises from the kitchen table, grabs his own bag, and rounds their group to let them outside. He waves Veronica off as she watches them leave from the mouth of the hall, coffee mug grasped between her palms and her cheeks damp, dotted as though she's attempted to clean herself up but replaced the tears with fresh ones every time that she's dabbed them from her cheeks.

She nods her goodbye. The door clicks closed behind him.

The children chat excitedly to each other, flocked around him in a mini-procession as they step carefully down the icy stairs. Yesterday's sleet had evolved into snow overnight, and his boots crunch in it as he leads the kids through the fluffy, white courtyard to the bus stop at the entrance. Sanda's black car is parked just across the street when they reach the stop, curiously empty and surprisingly almost totaled, when he gives himself the opportunity now to offer it his full attention. From across the wide street, he can't make out nearly as much detail as he would prefer, but the driver's side door is pulverized into itself, cratered deep with cracked paint and contorted metal. He wonders what kind of accident she'd gotten into after she was thrown out of the convenience store yesterday. He wonders if she really had been drunk or high as Hunk had so keenly suspected.

She might have gotten too distracted and hit a deer, he thinks. Maybe she'd bumped into one of the tall cement separators at the gas station. He stares at the car as others pass between them on the street, hissing through the wet of melted snow and rumbling around the corner until he can see the bright school bus making its slow, loping journey from the opposite direction.

It reaches them in minutes, and Lance crouches down to adjust the kids' coats, to make sure that they've fastened their bags correctly and buttoned each button of their clothes underneath. He wipes a stray spot of syrup from El ías's cheek, kisses each of them atop the head before urging them forward and telling them to have a good day.

He waves at them through the windows as the bus sputters to life and the flag slaps back against the side of it. As it groans and hisses and pulls itself back down the street, and the line of cars waiting behind it growl to life and follow slowly behind in their morning cortège.

He stands here for a long moment, rooted in the snow in the wide mouth of the apartment complex, watching them go. He allows his eyes to train on the back doors and the small children shoving their noses crudely against it as his hand, stalled mid-wave, drops to his side. The lurching mass of desaturated yellow disappears behind a bend of a corner, behind a wall of white-capped buildings as the sound of its motor fades into birdsong and urban noise pollution and the loud, chatting voices of shopkeepers tossing greetings across the wide street some ways down the road. The sun peeks through the dark clouds, beaming the slightest hints of warmth down onto his shoulders. The feeble brightness of it peeks blue into the empty gray sky. He blows out his breath in shallow clouds that disappear seconds later.

And he diverts his attention, once again, to Sanda's skeleton of a car across the street. It's too busy this morning, with many occupants of this town rushing to their jobs, to cross over and inspect it. He isn't sure if he would do so even if he could walk over there safely. His hands tuck into his pockets as he squints and leans forward, straining himself to make any sense of such a weird dent in the side of her vehicle, that he's positive wasn't there just the other night when he'd caught her casing the apartment complex and snapping those silly photographs that he knows couldn't hold up in court even if she were ever given the opportunity to use them.

He shakes his head, feeling suddenly uneasy. Sanda's beaten car isn't even the most of his concerns right now, when he thinks about the fact that she isn't even inside of it. He turns himself to look at the various businesses along the road, mentally calculating which of them will be open this early in the morning and which would even interest her enough to abandon her car here and walk over to them.

There's an insurance building, but it has a parking lot that's surely still empty behind it. There's the diner just at the edge of his range of sight. There's a bar that won't open until noon and the sporting goods store that he's never been interested enough in to memorize the hours. He bites his lip, brows low and pushed together, head busy with a dozen different ideas all filtering around and jumbling together and propelled to newer heights of discomfort when he thinks about what this might mean for him.

He jerks himself around suddenly, caught on the idea that she could have been bold enough to visit his apartment. He ducks himself and cranes his neck to see if anything has changed at his front door. Up the stairs and down the short hall, it doesn't seem that even the snow

has been disrupted. The only footprints embedded in it are his and the tiny, mismatched set left by the kids. He walks closer and rests his hand on the staircase rail. He watches his door for a long moment as he considers going inside and telling Veronica what he's found.

But he turns again and inspects the barren courtyard topped in untouched white snow. There are a few tires tacks leading from parking spots with wide circles left from the overhang of cars that the snow couldn't reach. There are bootprints skidded from slippery ice, a small collection of different sole patterns printed from various apartment doors around him. Shoes belonging to neighbors who he doesn't know. Prints leading from the entrance of the parking lot along the center and skirting up the stairs towards Shiro's apartment.

He stares at them for a long moment. Turns his head nearly a half a dozen times to be totally sure that they've started at the open mouth of the courtyard and led straight to Shiro's home. He follows them, too, careful not to step in them and disrupt them, as though they're evidence that he might be able to collect for a trial later on.

His heart rattles in his chest. His hands shake and his stomach feels tight and sick as he stumbles through the snow towards the stairs to Shiro's floor.

The snow on the guard rail has been shoved off. He tells himself that Shiro probably just went outside to smoke and cleared it away, even though that makes no sense. Even though the footprints lead *to* but not *from* the apartment and Shiro's never been the kind of person to clean up if he doesn't have to. He's never been the sort of guy keen on leaving more evidence that he's been somewhere than he absolutely needs to. He knows, deep down, that this must mean that whoever went in there hasn't left yet. And Sanda's car is empty. She's nowhere to be found. She wouldn't park far away and walk, at minimum, a few blocks to any businesses with their own parking that's far more accessible. She wouldn't be stationed out there so early in the morning, when it's rarely likely that anyone but Lance will be awake.

He isn't sure if he'd rather discover that Keith grabbed her in the middle of the night than meet her when he finally finds the courage to grab the spare key from behind the number plates and let himself through the door. He doesn't know if he'd be better off just letting this go and venturing back to his apartment to sleep. He hesitates for a moment at the bottom of the stairs as he thinks about this. He finds himself abruptly stalled in any mission that he'd just moments prior been hell-bent on seeing through to the end.

But all of this feels suddenly supremely important, like the kind of thing that he's required to investigate, like the sort of situation that surely warrants the fear that he's feeling right now. He doesn't want to open up the door and find whatever's waiting for him inside. He doesn't want to know with certainty that all of his paranoia was rightful. But he knows that if Sanda really did become bold enough to break in, Shiro is going to need his help. They're going to have to figure this out together. They're going to have to move forward as a group. And maybe, he thinks with growing anxiety, even make a run for it before Pigeon manages to get their new identities mailed out to them.

With this in mind, he pulls himself higher and higher on the staircase until he reaches the landing. In the center of the hall, obscured under dim shadow and encased in unmoved ice that's accumulated in the moisture overnight, Lance feels his breath stick in his throat as he stares at Shiro's door. He can hear it too, groaning faintly on its frame, pushed open and pulled ajar on its hinges by a light breeze chugging like blood in the veins of the entire complex through these empty, open halls. The first curiosity that he finds is this, as well: the fact that Shiro's door isn't closed, but it's not fallen completely open either. As he draws fretfully, slowly nearer, he can hear a quiet thunk of the wood smacking against something with each push of the breeze, before the pull of the wind tears it away and clatters it against the frame.

One, two, then three and four times, Lance watches this happen. He feels for a moment as though time is moving entirely too quickly for him to keep up with.

He rubs his hands together, puffing out a few short breaths that linger behind him even as he drags himself through the hall. The thumping continues, the door swings inward, then pushes back out. He can hear his heartbeat in his ears, his blood suddenly frigid as it pumps like solid ice through his veins. His breath feels swollen and stopped in the depths of his throat. He reaches out with a hand that's so shaken that it can barely grasp the doorknob.

His bag slides from his shoulder, he stops only to leave it rested against the wall just outside of Shiro's door.

There's no welcome mat to wipe his boots off on. There's no wreath popping color against the dented, depressing chipped gray paint.

Inside, through the widening and decreasing crack, he can see that it's

still dark. But there are small flecks of light bounding about, skimming over the black walls as though someone is moving about a flashlight in one of the deeper rooms. The kitchen, maybe, if he maps the layout correctly in his head. Shiro doesn't need a light to navigate his own apartment. Shiro doesn't have trouble seeing in the dark. The adhesive on one of the windows must have come off. He can piece apart a single strand of morning light twinkling out onto the floor. It's filthy inside. The carpets, perhaps a trick of the light, perhaps only because he's never caught a good glimpse of them outside of shadow, seem to be caked in a thick puddle of blackness that bleeds through the threadbare, frazzled edges of faded gray.

The knob in his palm is icy. Around the lock above it, he wonders if it was always so scratched.

He can hear footsteps as he draws nearer, can hear shuffling of something moving around and bumping into plastic bags that shudder and tumble over. A tearing and frenzied throwing around of things inside. Papers fluttering, clothing tossed and forgotten against walls. Cursing and heavy breathing.

He shoves through the widest gap that he can make in the door, thankfully quiet enough that the noise from the living room isn't interrupted.

He can feel the door wedging harder against whatever's blocked it off, strangely yielding if he pushes hard enough, strangely solid and heavy enough that he's barely afforded the berth to slip through.

The first thing that he notices upon stepping inside is that the lights in no rooms have been turned on. The bathroom door some ways away is closed and the slot beneath it yields only blackness. He gets a sense just from looking at it that he knows exactly who's hiding back there. He can't hear the whispering or feel any eyes on him, but there's a twinge in his wrist and a strange, inexplicable churning of nerves inside of him that make him wonder… is Keith really so far away?

He shakes his head, chalking up that mystery as solved, wondering if perhaps he's taken refuge in the bathroom because the adhesive on the windows has become so peeled that long strands of morning sun are stabbing through the dark. He follows the trails of them with his eyes, rubbing his cold hands over the front of his pants nervously as whoever is fumbling around in the kitchen moves further in, growing quieter and more distant, safer, for reasons that make no sense to him right now.

About the floor, there are torn trash bags spilling out their contents onto the carpet. It's littered with smudges of dirt and full, damp footprints, spots of something dark and shimmery that he can't put his finger on, but it stinks. The room smells coppery, heady and stale. It's so cold inside that his entire body is wracked with desperate tremors.

He steps further into the room, feeling the door lurch back and tap gently against his side, bounding from him shortly after and popping against the solid thing behind it, pinballing between them in a gradual, lazy way until Lance finally remembers how to breathe and walk and look around. He swallows thickly, bile risen and thick in his throat, jerking his head towards the dark kitchen, obscure in his position just around the corner from it and feeling as though any moment now, something might crawl out from the black and attack him.

It doesn't, however, no matter how long he stands still and watches. No matter how many things he can hear being thrown around in there, no matter how confused he feels when he hears the door to the balcony screech open and a twin pair of footfalls stepping out.

More light pours through the kitchen. It illuminates the landing where he stands, sparkling in the wet puddles of dark liquid staining into the carpet, and a single still, white arm splayed palm-down on the floor.

Lance wrenches back, clasps a hand over his mouth and nearly falls over in his fright. The door slides closed again, clicking against the threshold. Behind it, in the new light of the balcony, splayed out flat and deflated and tucked against the wall, Shiro lies face down. Silent, eyes open and glassy, cataract white.

He isn't breathing, isn't moving around or snoring. His arm extends in front of him as though he'd been reaching for something, and when Lance hovers closer, ghosting his hands above him as though he doesn't know where to touch first, he sees that the palm has been slashed open. A defensive wound, his mind supplements. Shiro's throat has drained out on the carpet as well, skin flayed and wet, deep crimson. Fresh enough that it hasn't dried yet. New enough that Shiro is still warm when Lance reaches down and touches him. He struggles to keep his breathing quiet, jolts when he hears the balcony door squeal closed and those heavy footsteps coming nearer.

His eyes are damp, his heart races. He can't find the strength to get up and run away. The door pushes back hard and snaps into his side, shoved roughly by a stronger gust of wind, strong enough that the

pullback successfully slams it closed.

And a voice just across from him calls out,

“He’s dead, Lance McClain. He isn’t going to hurt anyone anymore.”

Lance shudders and he’s almost too afraid to look up. There’s new light spilled into the room, a white-bright flashlight that he can see held steady in the silhouette of a person’s hand. He can make out the bounding light sparkling against the wet black blade of a knife in their other hand. His fingers dig into the fabric of Shiro’s pajama shirt. He opens his mouth to speak but no sound leaves him.

The dark body moves closer, moving the light of their flashlight to the side, panning a wide circle of white against the opposite side of the room, illuminating the dark, curled edges of the adhesive over the open window that Keith often climbs in and out of. Lance holds Shiro tighter, jerking his body upward when he flinches back, feeling strangely as though he needs to protect him, even though…

That thought ends where it begins. His brain sputters with the inability to work through anything that’s going on right now.

Shiro can’t be… He wouldn’t. A human couldn’t hurt him, he isn’t… He’s okay. Lance swears that he feels the smallest tremor of breath through Shiro’s back, feels positive that it’s a trick, that nothing has been ruined now, that Shiro will shove up and laugh it off soon, that all of this is a dream, a trick of the light. That Sanda, whose face is now spotlighted under the glare of the flashlight, who watches him with hard eyes and an unwavering frown, deep indents of wrinkles stark in the blackness, couldn’t have taken Shiro down alone.

She couldn’t have killed Shiro unless Keith…

He snaps his head towards the bathroom door.

He doesn’t have the ability to sense Keith, he knows. Any ache in his wrist, and excitement bubbling inside of him, it’s all in his head. The door to the bathroom is closed now, but he doesn’t know what lies inside. For all he’s able to ascertain right now, Keith’s corpse could be belly up in the bathtub. He could have been incinerated in the sunlight and burned to ash that mingles with the blood in the carpet fibers. He feels dread spreading like ink in water, from his heart fanned out to his heaving lungs, to the tingling tips of his fingers, to his frozen ears. He flicks his eyes back to Sanda, back to the bathroom door, to Shiro growing colder in his hands. Motionless, now that he’s

so desperate to feel movement from his body again. Silent and inanimate even as Sanda steps closer, as her knife stays raised in the air. As her silvery eyes sparkle in the light beneath her, as Lance wants so desperately to barrel through the door but feels rooted now, like a rabbit caught by its ankle in a trap. Like an animal that knows its own death when it sees it reflected back so clearly in the gaze of the predator before it, but still for whatever reason can't kick the urge to fight.

He can't leave Shiro alone here. He can't run away if he doesn't know for sure if Keith is safe. He tells himself that Shiro will pull himself up, he'll be okay. He's not dead. He isn't hurt. They didn't go through all of this together just for it to end before they could even run away. He's shaking violently now, tears hot on his cheeks. Throat tight and so rough with each staggered breath that rattles through him that he feels as though he might pass out any moment now. But he has to be strong. He has to figure something out.

If Keith is in that bathroom still, he needs to make sure that Sanda can't get to him.

Sanda drops the flashlight to the floor. It clatters and rolls, bouncing light over the walls. Her darkened figure bends inward as she wipes the blood from her blade onto the side of her pants. She raises it to her face and inspects the sharpened tip.

"It's over, Lance McClain," she tells him, "Ryou Yamazaki is dead. You're not running away, you're not hurting anyone else. So you can choose to come quietly, or you can try to fight me and I can tell my superiors that there was nothing that I could do. I had to kill you too because you were dangerous, enraged, perhaps, by the death of your serial killer boyfriend. Do you think anyone would be surprised, Lance McClain?"

Her eyes feel like embers on his skin. He bites his lip as he glares up at her, summoning any ferocity that he can find within himself through his fear and his confusion and the anguish lapping deep inside of him like waves brushing sandy shores.

Sanda waves the knife back and forth, wagging it like a big finger in his face, clicking her tongue and squelching her boots in the still-damp blood sponged into the carpet.

"Lance McClain was always predisposed to violence, we all knew it. That poor sister of his though, can you believe it? She loses her

parents, her siblings refuse to raise the snot-nosed brat that they left behind. Already saddled with that responsibility, she has those kids… and that brother of hers… a killer, taken out just as he attempted to claim another innocent life."

She's drawing nearer. Lance shirks back, but he still finds himself tethered to Shiro, finds that in this profoundly important moment, he's frozen in place.

"I warned you that you would die too. And you didn't listen."

There's a churning in the bathroom, the sound of something moving around. Lance hears the faintest lick of whispering through the gaps in the door, feels his heart shove up in his throat as Sanda whips around wildly and points her knife in its direction. She's close enough now that he can see every wrinkle in her blood stained clothes. He recognizes this outfit from the other day at the convenience store, realizes that she hasn't changed since then, stopped only to wrap a bandage around the ankle that she'd twisted, that he can see poking out through the gap where her pant leg separates from her scuffed, bloodied boots.

Lance understands that it's bright out here, that Sanda has clearly torn some of the adhesive from the windows to give herself more natural light. There's sun pouring in from a window just behind him, bathing the room in a strange, dusty orange that feels out of place in a cavern that's only been dark since he first began sneaking out here. It outlines the stark blood on the carpets, nearly black against the faded, stained gray. He knows that it wouldn't be safe for Keith to come out here, that if Keith were to risk it, it wouldn't end well for Sanda either.

And he isn't sure even as the adrenaline courses through him, as he clutches Shiro's still and cold body, why he even cares about her safety anymore. But he thinks of Shiro here, how he would feel if he were still alive. How he wouldn't want more blood on Keith's hands, how he'd urge them to escape safely together so Keith could continue to exist long after he's gone. Shiro would want them to be better, and they *have* to be better for him. Lance doesn't know what he believes anymore, doesn't know whether he's suspended more firmly in the belief that Shiro will re-animate any moment now or the gradually clearer idea that he's really dead for good.

But he knows what he has to do now. He knows that for his entire life spent half asleep, he never took any real risks and he never cared for anything unconditionally, and he never felt a resolve grown so steady

inside of him that he'd be willing to sacrifice his life for another living creature.

But Lance feels it now, after all this time.

Finally, fully awake.

He isn't certain that Keith is even alive in that bathroom, but Sanda, now, is creeping closer to the door as though she doesn't know what might exist on the other side of it. Lance scoots forward, grasping her around the ankle with a shaking hand, tightening his grip enough so that he can feel the crunch of his fingers around the tendons and bone, funneling every last ounce of his strength into pinning her here and hurting her enough that she can't move forward. She stumbles and cries out, pained and surprised as she whips herself back around and her heavy boot connects with the side of his head. There's a crack of it, loud and harsh and deafening. Lance sees spots of white in the blurry corners of his eyes. His fingers slip but he holds his grasp around her ankle. She kicks up and tumbles down, settles on her backside for a brief moment before her foot connects with his shoulder, his side, and any part of him that her leg can reach.

They scramble like this for a moment, Sanda yelling obscenities at him, kicking him hard enough that he can feel his bones grate together and his muscles aching. That he can already imagine the ugly bruises that will paint his skin if he survives this. The sole of her boot catches him flatly and firmly in the center of his face. Cracking his nose and splintering a horrible stab of pain up the center of his skull, down the back of his neck, bundled just between his shoulders as his eyes, for a moment, see nothing but bright, startling light. Warm blood pours from his now crooked, flattened nose like a tap turned full blast. He can taste the copper of it on his tongue, chokes on the feeling of it sliding down his throat.

He can hear the movement in the bathroom growing louder now, an overwhelming cacophony of whispers and scratching as Sanda stretches herself away from him, still tethered by his hand around her leg, reaching now desperately for the knife that she dropped when he grabbed her and—

Pain. Loud, disorienting pain. His fingers drop from her ankle, rise as though automatically, as though by instinct alone to grasp at the feeling of the blade plunged into the side of his neck. His eyes widen, he chokes. His other hand reaches up to meet it, he can feel the broken tip of the blade jutting out through the opposite side of his

neck. Sanda rips the knife from him, from an artery that he remembers Veronica pointing out to him in a textbook that she'd brought home from school once, when he was a little kid. She'd taught him short lessons about the human body when she came home from work. She taught him many things that all feel bundled together and overlapped as his mind folds together each memory in a myriad of snapshots that flicker just in the back of his head. Lance can clearly picture that circle in the book now, just at the edge of the throat. His fingers are damp with warmth. Sanda, pulling away from him carefully, rises to her feet and brushes herself off.

The knife clatters next to him. He tries, for a moment, to grasp it, but his vision is too unfocused, his muscles rubbery, his thoughts confused and terrified and muddy. He can't breathe. His throat fills with blood and he chokes desperately. Against his leg, still connected by the faintest amount of contact, he pretends that he can feel Shiro growing warmer, that he twitches. Imagines it so clearly as his conscious fades that it almost seems real.

Shiro, breathing gently. Shiro's sides expanding in slow sputters as though he's a machine turned suddenly back on, whirred to life by electricity and not an organic thing ripped violently from its tragically mortal husk. The shuddering in the bathroom grows restless. Lance's fingers slide from his throat and drop weakly against the carpet.

From his spot on his stomach, he watches Sanda's legs limp as she ventures to the bathroom. Faint footprints stamped in red follow her. Her weak ankle drops like awkward rubber with each footfall. She reaches for the handle of the bathroom door, hovers her fingers over her gun in its holster at her side.

The world around Lance feels fuzzy and warm and he's so tired now that his eyes can barely stay pried open as he watches her. As his weak heart patters. As he feels, behind him, perhaps Shiro, waiting for him just at the entrance to the afterlife, rising from his position on the floor and reaching out a comforting cold hand to card through his hair.

The bathroom door clicks open.

Sanda's scream rings out through the fuzzy, saturated space of the empty living room. There's a sound then, as Lance eases away, like an animal crying out. Cracking. Wet dripping. Thudding. Thundering whispers. Uncanny cries like a beast that he's never heard in any nature documentary.

A woman sobbing, begging for her life. And tearing that Lance has never witnessed before. Dull and distant and muffled.

The world around him succumbs to his sudden need to sleep.

Dark silence.

And Shiro's big body animated maybe only in his imagination, pulling him forward, cradling him against his soft, wide, warm chest. The gentle beating of his heart, slow for a moment but gaining speed. Shiro's hot breath on his skin. The rumble of his gentle voice reverberating from inside of him and calling out into the now-silent living room.

"Keith." It's the last thing Lance hears before the quiet clogs his ears completely. "You need to get over here. He's not going to last much longer."

Hunk drums his fingers against the counter, craning his neck to inspect the clock hanging from the opposite wall, just above the small selection of energy drinks and frozen coffees kept chilled in a limited amount of coolers just over the wide rows of shelves. There's a single customer roving the aisles some ways away, a familiar red-haired man with a thick, upturned mustache that Hunk has seen Lance speaking animatedly to when he stops in here from time to time. The name escapes him, but he doesn't worry about it too much. Instead, he watches the eccentric, wide movements of the man's hands as though he's sweeping everything that he needs into the basket hung over his elbow, propping himself on his own arm against the counter as he finds himself amused by this customer's general, animated disposition.

He can understand why Lance would like a man like this. He recognizes this guy from the papers and all sorts of events in town. He remembers him as the doctor who owns that little office in one of the

busier areas, a familiar face among a slew of others blurred over the last few months of taking his mother to and from chemo.

But right now, in the current moment, that man is picking through rows of knock-off brand candy, apparently conflicted between the “Red Fish-Shaped Candy Snacks” and the “Sour Child-Shaped Gummy Bites”. Hunk resists the urge to call out and offer his assistance. The pursuit of a good afternoon snack, he knows, is one journey that every man must make on their own.

But the sight of one of Lance’s other acquaintances only reminds Hunk more noticeably of Lance’s unexplained tardiness right now. It’s really not like him to be more than five or ten minutes behind, always apologetic and rushing blindly through the store as though their boss ever actually checks the attendance sheet, as though Hunk himself wouldn’t just stick out his neck and claim that Lance asked him to cover a few extra minutes alone because he was busy doing something else important.

Lance hasn’t texted him to warn him, however, and he hasn’t answered any of his phone calls. It’s been an hour and a half now, and still no word and no response. Hunk grows worried, considers how late into the evening he’s willing to stick around until he calls their boss and expresses his concern. The red-haired man across the store hums and complains quietly, reaching forward and taking both bags in his hands, stopping to collect a few candy bars as well, before he makes his way to the front of the shop and unloads his basket onto the counter.

Hunk wonders if he and his mother are recognizable patients and if the doctor would even be willing to divulge that information in public, despite the fact that both of them are alone in the convenience store. The doctor gives no indication beyond that same goofy smile that he usually seems to wear that he notices him at all, and Hunk smiles back nonetheless, reaching out to accept the man’s items and asks him lightly, “Did you find everything okay?”

The man's smile stretches out wide, wiggling the corners of his thick mustache.

“I sure did, my dear boy. Although, to be frank, I was hoping that one of your co-workers would be in today as well.”

Hunk’s smile twitches, teeth buried lightly in his bottom lip as he offers a small, nervous laugh. The feeling of discomfort, he knows, is

rooted in a very recent increase of oddballs seemingly orbiting Lance at every turn. But he knows this man, knows that Lance knows and likes this man, and so he ignores the spark of uncertainty, the distrust, and clicks the scanning gun to log each UPC as he drops the candy into a single, small plastic bag.

“Yeah, he’s supposed to be here,” Hunk says blithely, “Lance, right? You guys know each other.”

The man nods, rubbing both hands together before stopping, jumping just a little in place as though he’s been startled, and patting around in his pockets for his wallet. Hunk remembers that about him as well, the moving about constantly as though he’s a wound animatronic, as though he’s unable to stay still for even the shortest periods of time. He remembers Lance’s soft, coy smile when he’d come in for the first time, lips pursed and brows pushed high up as though he’d been consistently holding back his laughter.

“Yes, yes, young Lance,” the man says, “His sister and I are very close. She’s my receptionist. She’s been concerned about him lately and I realized that we hadn’t spoken in quite some time. I supposed that perhaps it would be pertinent to set up a lunch date with him. It seems that young Lance has been making himself quite the rare artifact around town as of late.”

Hunk swallows, tapping at the register keys and reading out the man’s total softly in jagged, unsure words. His eyes wander to the clock again. Lance is almost two hours behind now.

“I know what you mean,” he says distantly, barely paying attention to the sounds leaving him anymore, “If it weren’t for working here together, I don’t think I’d see him at all anymore.”

The man pays, collects his bag, and steps back as though to make his exit. He catches Hunk’s eye with a small, peculiarly sharp wave, his gaze suddenly focused and hard. His lips set in a firm line that tugs at the wrinkles disappearing into the crafted corners of his upturned mustache.

“That is quite curious, isn’t it? Perplexing indeed to wonder what a boy like Lance McClain might be investing his time into these days.”

And he's gone, just like that, after. Slipping through the door with a jingle of the overhead bells and a proud, bouncy traipse to his car parked just feet away, tucked neatly and tight against the curb. Hunk watches him through the glass, the way that the evening light bounds from the sleek exterior of his car. How the dwindling sun burns in his fiery hair and glows golden in his pale skin. He watches the empty parking lot and listens to the gravel crunch as his tires lurch out onto the highway. And he thinks about that crazy woman and Lance's odd behavior.

He thinks about the many nights that Lance has turned down his invitations to come to parties or just to hang out at his house.

Lance, when they met, was a lonely, angry child who had trouble making friends. He was a solemn and broken kid from a tragic home and a past so heavy that his tiny shoulders struggled to carry the burden of it alone.

Through checkered smiles with missing teeth and detention and school dances and parties that left both of them woefully hung over for aching hours after they went home, Hunk has watched Lance evolve into a different person. Watched him shrug off the trauma of his parents' deaths and lift the responsibility of co-raising his sister's children onto his back. He's watched him bench his distant dreams of college and a career for the sake of the same sister who saved him, watched him strung up like a martyr in the acceptance of a fate that had already been sealed for him before he was even old enough to have a say in it.

Through everything, Lance has always smiled. He's always joked and laughed and pretended that everything was okay.

But lately, Hunk isn't sure if he even recognizes Lance anymore. Doesn't know him as more than a memory and a familiar face. He's grown distant over the months, secretive. He's crafted a reality around himself that Hunk suddenly feels alienated from, deviated from the path that Hunk had expected for him to adhere to and do so to such a drastic extreme that lately, Hunk isn't sure if he's even the same person who grew up right alongside him.

He feels a shudder of anxiety ripple through him. He checks the clock on the wall—over two hours now passed, and still, no Lance.

He swallows the growing thick of nervousness in his throat, drumming his knuckles on the counter. There are no cars in the parking lot

outside. His shift will be ending in less than an hour now.

He breathes deeply, in and out, and rolls his shoulders to work out the new tension bundled there. He slips from the counter through the door into the back room. He fumbles in his coat pockets in the dim light of the storage room, shoved between a shelf of disposable plastic soda cups and a dozen boxes of various papers and labels all slotted close together in their rows. His fingers tremor as he clicks the buttons on his cellphone, holding it to his ear and listening to the trilling of the line before it connects.

“Hunk? Is everything okay?”

He swallows his nervousness, nodding to the blindness of the empty storage room as he studies the posters taped to the wall in front of him without really reading them, as though his eyes haven’t perused the bubbly red letters cautioning him to wash his hands a hundred times before. He shoves away from the wall, pacing just a few feet to the door and ducking his head through it, one hand planting his phone firmly to his ear and the other holding the door ajar. He turns his head back and forth, studying the lobby to see if any customers are nearing the entrance or if any cars are parked in the lot. It’s still empty. He presses his lips together firmly, pulling himself back, allowing the door to swing closed in front of him.

“Y-yeah, sorry Veronica, I… I just didn’t know who else to call. Is… Lance okay? He hasn’t come in yet and he was scheduled to start his shift two hours ago.”

Veronica is silent for a moment. He can hear someone talking in the background of her end of the call, and he feels suddenly guilty, wonders if she’s still at work and if it was even a good idea to contact her in the first place when, surely, someone skipping work for the first time ever shouldn’t be as big of a deal as he’s making it out to be.

“I—uh,” she cuts that off, the line shuffling as he imagines that she sticks her hand over the speaker, chatting for a short moment with another unfamiliar voice, “Sorry, I’m just leaving for the day, but—but he was home this morning before I left. He walked the kids to the bus. He... didn’t come back inside, but that’s not abnormal these days. I thought maybe he visited his boyfriend again and they went out to eat, but… I’ll call him. I’ll let you know. I’m sorry, Hunk. I don’t know what’s gotten into him lately.”

Hunk nods again, both hands grasped at the phone at his ear as he

turns his eyes to the ceiling. The computer, some short distance away, whirrs noisily as the screensaver creeps swatches of purple and blue through an empty black background, forming fast, indecipherable shapes before continuing to morph and writhe about. There's a calendar pinned up just above it, forgotten for long months and left on November's picture of a shallow, frozen lake. Little black silhouettes of ducks hover in the blue and pink skyline. Lance had laughed at that image, noted wryly that none of the lakes in their town ever looked so picturesque. Hunk's requested days off are jotted down in blue ink over various dates. Lance's name is absent from any of the sections. He doesn't ask off ever, really. He's never closed early. He's never made any effort to rebel or neglected his duties here. He's never been anything but absolutely, unflinchingly reliable.

"Thanks," he says meekly, eyes suddenly damp and throat painfully tight, "I—I just, uh… I'm worried about him, sorry. This just isn't like him."

There's a short pause in which Hunk can imagine Veronica nodding in silent agreement, brows pushed low and knitted close together, lips pursed in that displeased frown that she often used to focus on Lance when he was being bratty as a kid. Hunk remembers, for a moment, long nights and early, sleepy mornings spent visiting their home. He remembers when Veronica would bake them pre-sliced cookie dough and rent them cartoons from the discount movie rental store that they'd watched nearly a dozen times together. He remembers when she bought Lance a secondhand gaming system and a few popular titles, how she used to pop popcorn and make kool-aid and how she always pretended that she didn't hear them when they'd stay up chatting late at night, long after she'd turned off the lights.

He remembers how she assumed the role of Lance's mother as though it was only the most natural thing in the world. How she's always, all these years, accepted any bumps along the road and led Lance down their winding, complicated path together as though it was totally second nature to do so.

He shakes his head, swiveling in place and turning to face the door again. The bell still hasn't jingled, and he isn't particularly worried about any customers joining him. But there's the slightest hint of a thought at the back of his head, a hope that maybe Lance will traipse in any moment now, apologetic and frantic and embarrassed as he shrugs off his coat and waves Hunk off for the night. Horrified, then, that he'd actually allowed so much time to pass without notice that Hunk actually felt the need to involve Veronica as well.

But no such thing happens as he waits. Veronica, on the line, asks if he's okay.

He snaps back to attention, reassuring her that surely everything will be fine. He's just allowing his paranoia to get to him again. He's just being a baby about this as he's always been known to overreact about every weird situation with Lance in the past.

Veronica doesn't seem convinced, but he isn't confident enough to question it. He finds that his cowardice refuses him the ability to ask for any answers. He doesn't want to know what she might know that he doesn't. He doesn't want to learn right now, when his anxiety has already grown to tower so high around him, that perhaps this isn't as surprising to Veronica as it is for him.

They end the call soon after. He drags himself back out to the counter, watching the still road outside, studying the graying snow pushed into the gutters and the corners of the parking lot. Aching as the sun sets and blackness overtakes the sleepy, unmoving world and even still, as the hours pass, Lance is nowhere to be found.

A customer, a single person, visits the store before closing. He buys a six-pack of beer and a pack of cheap cigarettes, and he eyes Hunk for a moment as he slides his wrinkled money across the counter.

"Is the other guy sick?" He asks, and Hunk huffs a small laugh.

"No idea," he says, "I'm covering for him tonight."

And it's slow then, until the end of the night. Until he locks the doors and turns off the open sign and mops the floors. Until he's shrugging on his coat after tucking the till inside of the safe, and the phone latched in the break room wall rings unexpectedly, jarring him from his thoughts with such a fright that he knocks his elbow into the counter just in the right place to score white-hot tension up to his shoulder. He hisses loudly, cursing under his breath and wrenching himself around to look through the black windows as though someone might have witnessed his blunder.

Nothing but dark greets him. For a single moment in time, between the last ring of the telephone and the next, in that single silent moment of calm, Hunk feels as though something beyond the glass stares back.

But the phone cries out a moment later. He's torn away from that tremor of fear scored through him so chillingly that the hairs on the back of his neck spring upward.

He rushes through the side door and into the back room. He grasps the phone in sweaty, shaking hands and huffs a breathless, "Hello?"

The line is quiet for a moment. He feels his pulse pounding hard in his throat. His sweaty fingers slip on the receiver, cradling it closer to his ear as he waits.

"H-hello?"

His second greeting is unsure, weighed down by trepidation and a growing sense of foreboding. The person on the other line clears their throat, breathing in deeply as though to ground themselves and says, "This is Hunk, correct?"

At first, he isn't sure where he recognizes the voice from, where he's heard that same accent so unusual to land-locked Colorado. But the serendipity of the universe feels as though it folds together to twine one memory into his current rampant thoughts, and the realization clicks. He finds that he can remember the man's name that had skipped his mind just hours ago.

His throat feels torn up and grated as though he's swallowed gravel from the parking lot. His breathing sputters out so shallowly that his head swims and small speckles of light dot the dim yellow of the storage room around him.

"D-Dr. Smythe, right? Uh, yeah, this is Hunk. How… how did you get this number? Or, uh, why are you calling?"

There's another short pause. Another strand of a moment stretched so thin that it nearly snaps his patience.

"Y-yes, I'm calling on behalf of *Ms.* McClain. She wanted me to get in touch with you and let you know what's going on."

Hunk straightens his posture for a moment, reaching up a lax hand and looping it loosely around the bars of a shelf just beside him, steadying himself against it with little regard to how wobbly it feels and how it jerks when he rests his weight against it. He doesn't like the subtle drop in the doctor's voice, doesn't care for the idea that Veronica, for some reason, wasn't able to call him herself. He knows from Lance's fleeting stories and personal interactions with the doctor

that he's more than his sister's boss, more of a mentor and a family friend who used to know his parents. He's a man who's taken every opportunity to assist their family when they'll let him, but…

Why can't Veronica call him herself?

What is going on that's so crucial that she can't even pick up the phone?

"Okay," he says breathlessly, already steeling himself for whatever he's going to hear next, already so overfilled with dread that he can feel tears welling at the edge of his eyelids in anticipation, "I—I called her earlier because Lance—"

"Yes." Dr. Smythe cuts him off. His voice wavers for a short moment, stunted in the enunciation of that single syllable. A short breath clips through the phone and Hunk feels his heart tremor, feels his knees weaken and the levy of his eyelids give way to the weight of his tears. A few boxes of papers and labels tip from the wobbly shelf beside him and spill out, scattering their contents on the floor.

Dr. Smythe drags in a long and shuddered breath.

"Hunk, I'm very sorry to be the one to tell you this, I—"

Hunk watches the way that the yellow break room light casts strange shadows on the ceiling. Indecipherable blotted shapes that meld together in black, encased in muddy gold, crept into the cracks and water stains and bleeding out the dim colors surrounding him. He reads the blurry words on each label on the floor. The empty expiration date spaces, the freshness determiners. The bold letters of each house brand and the various vacation request forms and applications layered like thin snow over the tile.

"Lance—" The doctor's voice cracks. "He's… he's dead, Hunk, I'm so sorry."

The world cracks open and swallows him up. Blackness hints at the corners of his damp eyes. On the phone, Dr. Smythe asks if he's feeling okay, if he needs help, if he can hear him, if he can…

The floor feels closer. The words in his ears are muffled and confusing

and too distant to comprehend.

In the distance, a siren blares through the night.

And Lance, his best friend since grade school, is dead.

Chapter 27

Dear Lance,

It's been a week now since you were pronounced dead and… it's weird. I gotta say, it's really weird to think about that. Because at some point, the candlelight vigils end and the missing posters fade and peel and break off of storefront windows and you're just left with this gnawing, aching sense of emptiness, exacerbated by that hollow tomb of your bedroom in the apartment, and the fact that no one is here now to walk the kids to the bus. Like, you feel someone's absence everywhere, and it's different than it was with mom and dad. Maybe just for me, I don't know.

We never really talked about it, did we? Like, how it felt for you, being a kid when mom and dad died and you just had no idea how to compartmentalize that. I had so much to do back then with the Visas and finding work and withdrawing from college that I never actually took the time to consider how all of that was affecting you, too. We didn't talk about a lot of things, and I'm only realizing that now when you aren't around anymore. Hindsight is 20/20, right? It's impossible to know what you'll miss talking to someone about when you're still with them and everything seems okay, and… you don't realize yet exactly how it's going to feel once they're ripped out of your life permanently.

I guess I just thought that you'd leave and still be in contact, but… There was so much blood in that apartment, Lance. The only thing that even made that case qualify as a missing person and not a murder was the fact that there weren't any bodies. Not even the cops really believed it. People around town were already offering me their condolences like a day after that whole situation hit the papers. But you were "missing" and not "dead" for five months just because there wasn't any corpse. Like, the kids and I are just supposed to accept that you aren't gone even though the floor was so soaked in your blood that the carpets almost looked like they just came in red.

You can petition to pronounce someone deceased, did you know that? Technically the cases generally just "age out" at ten years, but if you have enough proof, you can convince the cops to stop looking.

If you are still out there, you're welcome. Big sis always has your back.

But, more realistically, if you're at the bottom of a lake somewhere…

I can't deny that I'm angry with you for doing that to me and my children, but I know that you warned me. I know that things were weird for the last few weeks before you went away. I know that I should have been better and stronger and that I could have stopped you if I'd just pulled my head out of my ass and saw the truth for what it was—that you were in trouble and you didn't even know it well enough to ask for help, but I guess that's in the past too.

And I guess all that we can do anymore is just wait for you and keep trying. And I do that, too. Every day, I swear that I can hear you laughing with the kids when I wake up. And sometimes I see a guy walking down the street who looks just like you, down to that stupid old book bag that you used to carry everywhere and your sweet smile, but… the eyes are different. He's not you when he turns around.

But for a second, a split, wonderful second, it's like…

You're still here. And everything is okay.

But then, of course, you're not.

Veronica shoves her cart through the crowded grocery store aisles, mindful of the kids perusing the shelves just a small section away as she runs her gaze over the assortment of sugar-packed breakfast cereals. She grabs an off-brand box from the shelf and drops it in her cart, skimming over the grains and wheats in search of something healthier that might give her more energy to start her day. Outside, the snow spits wildly through the sliding doors, the sky marked with slow-spreading darkness as nightfall covers the town, already so early in the evening. It's growing darker earlier and earlier as they gradually approach autumn. The short days are frigid with harsh, still air. Veronica's pant legs are already lined up to the knee with slowly melting slow. The early mountain winter is fast approaching and it's been months since—

She shakes her head, fingers dithering just on the matte surface of an All-Bran box. Her nails click against the cardboard. She lowers her fingers and grasps something blindly that she's sure she'll regret purchasing later. But her thoughts now are caught in the mini-blizzard outside, imagining that the white might culminate together in the shape of a man. That they might part away like ocean waves to reveal

him: Lance just forgot something in the car. He was polite enough to park it while the rest of them filed inside.

The snow continues to roil in the inky black, blurred in its speed and whipping past too quickly for her eyes to settle on just one single flake at a time. There's a corkboard just through those automatic doors, in the landing where they hold the carts. Warm and dewy from the overhead heaters and just moist enough that the papers hanging from the board are always damp to the touch. On that board, she'll recognize the faded smile of a man printed on a missing person poster. She'll avert her eyes as they pass it later on. The kids have learned to stop pointing it out.

No one has called the helpline since they put the posters up.

And now, September after April, she isn't sure if anyone ever will.

She stocks up on granola bars, bread, and milk. The boys ask if they can buy some rubbery, stretchy dinosaur toys that cost a dollar each. She allows them to drop them in the cart, tells Nadia with a nod of her head towards the toy section that she can pick out something as well.

The music overhead scratches and the voices filling the space around her rise and ebb like tides.

Her phone beeps and vibrates with an incoming text.

"I'll be home late. Don't wait up for me."

It's not Lance.

It hasn't been Lance for a very long time.

"That's okay, I love you," she responds despite this.

She passes the aisle of pancakes and syrup without grabbing any of it. She finds that she doesn't have the stomach for it anymore.

Lance,

They ran an exposé on that Detective Sanda in the newspaper. They confirmed her death too, at least unofficially. They called her "a stoic but caring hero with an exemplary, long-standing career in saving lives". I thought you'd find that as funny as I did, so I saved the clipping and I'm keeping it in the box where I put the rest of your things, just in case I ever have a place to send them. Or maybe just to remember you by, when I'm old and wrinkled and I haven't seen you in decades. Maybe when Nadia and the boys grow up, they'll want to remember more about their uncle than a few blurry childhood memories and everyone in the whole town expecting for them to be delinquents just like they expected the same of you.

Nadia got sent to her school counselor a few days ago because she drew a picture of you in her art class. Not just you, of course, because you put those ideas about monsters in her head and she's determined that you were swept off in the night by some kind of shadow person. But she seems happy with that, and I don't know how old a kid has to be before imaginary friends are a problem. Her therapist seems to think that she's dealing with her grief in a healthy way and that it shouldn't be an issue if she eventually learns to grow out of it. It's only been a few months, I guess, so we should give her enough time to come to terms with it.

The boys don't really talk about it. Silvio is like you. He wants to be the man for all of us, but we're all different now. The town raised funds for a headstone next to mom and dad's. I haven't gone out there since they put it there, so I guess I understand now… why you never wanted to visit them.

You were mad at them for leaving and maybe… you were right. They weren't there anymore. Just like you aren't.

But at least with mom and dad, we knew that their bodies were in those caskets. I just kept thinking while the newspaper took their pictures and Dr. Smythe wrapped his arm around me and people kept coming over to tell me how sorry they were, 'They didn't even hollow out the plot. It's just dirt down there. Just a solid wall with no casket. Worse than empty. Worse than nothing.'

You're worse than dead.

Nadia spills a small amount of milk over the overfilled edges of her glass, and Veronica rises from her seat at the kitchen table to help her

clean up. She's mindful when she runs the dishrag over the edges of the cup to reassure Nadia that it's okay. Accidents happen. She's not in trouble for making a mess.

And she imagines how someone else would handle a situation like this. If a nebulous blank figure in the kids' past might someday exist as nothing but a blurry memory, telling them that overfilling milk is a sign that they'll do great things when they grow up. It almost makes her laugh when she thinks about it, until it makes her sad. Until she finds that she's run the rag over the same spot on the glass so many times that Nadia has to ask her if everything is okay in order to snap her back to attention. She nods and apologizes, eases back and watches as Nadia carries the glass carefully to the table. She sets it down as she shuffles into her chair, planting her lips at the corner and sucking up the excess milk as Veronica tosses the rag in the sink and washes her hands.

The snow outside falls heavily as though weighed down. It collects in large piles just beyond the window, white against the black evening. Stark and bright and fluffy enough that Veronica can envision perfectly how it might crunch beneath her boots if she were to go outside. She sits in her spot at the table again, tearing her eyes away from the courtyard. In the apartment directly across from hers, she can see that the new neighbors have their living room light turned on, shades drawn, but open enough that each passing displacement of air as they walk by jostles the cheap plastic shades and allows her a small peek of new white carpet and socked feet.

She doesn't want to think about what existed there before. She won't talk to those people, in fear of what might leave her mouth if she tries.

You're living in my brother's only known grave.

It's not a particularly welcoming opening line.

She presses her fingers between her eyes, massaging away a growing headache.

"Mama," Nadia calls out quietly, and when Veronica raises her eyes again, nearly half of the milk has been drained from her glass, "What does deceased mean?"

She sucks in a long breath, eyes trained unwittingly and unwillingly on that single yellow light across the courtyard.

“It means someone isn’t coming back, honey. Like… they’ve gone to heaven.”

She doesn’t ask where Nadia heard that word. She finds that more than anything, she doesn’t want to know.

Lance,

Something strange happened the other day. I got a letter in the mail with no return address. There was a birthday card inside for a one-year-old. I thought maybe it was sent to the wrong address, but my name was written on the front. And inside, it said, “Congrats, Veve” and nothing else, with $500 taped to the bottom. You used to tease me all the time when we were kids and Abuela Fidelia would call me by that horrible nickname. I used to hate it when she said it, but, of course, it’s “disrespectful” to ask your elders to refer to you as anything but what they’ve decided to use. You weren’t even old enough to remember it, but I think you heard mom and dad joking around about it when you got older. You inherited it from them, I guess. But you’re the only person who knows my address now who would remember that.

I didn't report it to the police, but the bank teller gave me a weird look when I put that money in my account.

Acxa has her suspicions about it too. She thinks that someone in town feels sorry for us and decided to reach out anonymously. I know she’s just another thing that we never got around to talking about, but I had a feeling that you knew, even before the last time that we spoke. I always kind of suspected that you were about to say something about it, but we just never had the time.

I could kick myself all day and night, wondering why I didn’t just make the time for it. If Acxa and the police and everyone in town is right, then maybe you are dead. Maybe your killer just dragged you, and Sanda, and Ryou off somewhere and disposed of you. Maybe that’s why they never found Ryou’s car. It’s soaking at the bottom of one of the frozen lakes that they didn’t think to skim. It’s wherever Sal ended up, in some cougar’s

belly. Not even afforded the dignity that Sendak was, to be found by someone who could know, then, with certainty that he wasn't alive anymore.

Maybe it's easier for Nadia to understand all of this if she attributes some reason to it. It's hard enough for her and the boys to grasp bedtime, let alone why their uncle was here one morning and saw them off to the bus, then gone without any trace but a pool of blood in his boyfriend's empty apartment by the time that they got home from school. A journalist from Denver contacted me a few weeks ago, asking for an interview, said he ran a vlog or something that covered unsolved mysteries in the area and he wanted to see if he could help find you.

I didn't call him back. It just felt too weird to admit that something "unsolved" had even happened. I couldn't stop thinking that everything should have made sense, like… if I had just one more piece of the puzzle, if you'd said or done just one more odd thing, maybe now I could figure it out.

But all that I can think of anymore is how you used to laugh so hard sometimes that you'd squirt your drink out of your nose. Or how you always cried when we watched sad cartoon movies with the kids. Or how you were always this reliable constant in my life that left a part of me raw and bared when you were removed. Like mom, if you remember, when she'd take off her wedding band to do dishes. There was that white stripe of skin framed by tan on her ring finger where it never saw the sun.

That's how it feels, kind of. Like I've never been as exposed and vulnerable as I am now, without you. I never realized how stunted I was under the surface until you went away.

It's too lonely here without you now, like even the walls are thinner without the sound of you moving around in your room at night. The murmur of you watching those stupid cat videos on your phone at 5 AM that used to drive me crazy. Your too-loud laugh that I'd give anything to wake up hearing tomorrow morning, or, like, ever again.

Do you remember when Abuela Fidelia used to say, "La muerte de tu abuelo dejó un agujero en mi vida, que crece cada día más" when she'd talk about grandpa? You were way too young to really hear it personally, I think, and I know your Spanish skills—or lack thereof—were a big point of discussion between mom and dad, but… She meant that the hole in her life that grandpa left behind was too big. And it only got bigger. And I never understood that, until now. I never knew how something could just keep bleeding out no matter how many times you try to mend it. Never spared a

single thought to a broken bone or a cough or a runny nose that might continue to get worse no matter how often you treat it.

But it feels like that, Lance. You being gone.

It feels like a part of me got ripped out and disappeared just like you did. Maybe you took it with you.

But every single day… It hurts more.

And I don't think I'll ever forgive you for leaving me. I said it, yeah, sure, it's not the most sympathetic thing that a mourning sister can say about her probably-dead brother, but…

I don't have to be nice anymore, I guess, right?

It's not like I'm ever going to see you again anyway.

The walk back to her car takes less than five minutes, but through the sludge of half-melted snow and the whipping of sleet in her eyes, it feels as though it might as well have been a decade.

Veronica rubs her hands together, splaying them out side-by-side in front of the heat vent in her car as it gradually spits warm air out. Her windows are frosted and slowly gaining steam, melting away the mess from the inside as her radio plays a soft tune that she barely registers as she waits for the tired bones of her vehicle to wake up.

The pathetic jack-o-lantern lights hung from the overhanging roof of the doctor's office are already frozen and caked in heavy, shimmery

ice to the extent that the bulbs have each gone out. But reliably, the doctor replaces them each time that it becomes warm enough that the ice melts away and he can disassemble them and replace each dead bulb. And the windows are so thickly-coated with snow that she can barely make out the sparkly window clings that he's selected from the dollar store this year. It doesn't feel like Halloween much, more like deep winter after Christmas. More like that liminal drag of time between the last holiday and the next, in which as a child she used to feel as though she were floating between two different versions of humanity: the Veronica from the prior year, and the Veronica that would come after. A new and mysterious person who she wouldn't meet until she became her in the beginning of the next month.

But now she just feels numb. Cold, too, chilled to the bone and shivering desperately as her car's heating fails to warm her quickly enough. And stripped of anything internally that might spark excitement inside of her when she considers how much fun the kids will have during the brief breadth of time that they'll be able to travel from house to house in the neighborhoods surrounding the apartment complex before it gets too cold.

Their uncle, oftentimes, would buy a large assorted bag of candy from the store a week or so before trick-or-treating in anticipation for the disappointment of the night. The kids always seemed to believe that each new year would be different, they'd be able to stay out longer and experience that traditional Halloween thrill of asking their neighbors for treats. But each year, of course, the weather never relented, never pitied their lack of normal childhood experiences and more often than not plunged into deeper coldness that would zap any remaining energy from them far too soon.

But Uncle Lance was reliable with that big bag of candy. Uncle Lance always knew just what to say in order to make them feel better.

Uncle Lance isn't here this year, but Acxa rented a few kids movies from the rental store and stocked up on popcorn and hot chocolate, and she set up her old VCR in their living room after fretting over the controls of their too-new TV for nearly an hour, which Veronica had allowed through her amusement and felt entirely too guilty to inform her that they could order movies through an app that came pre-installed on the TV.

Another package came in the mail earlier in the week: a small box containing only a jumbo-sized bag of cheap Halloween candy and another card addressed to Veve. She isn't sure if she's willing to divvy

out the treats to the kids or not, and when she'll do it if she does. She doesn't know why she didn't just throw the bag away when she opened it up and witnessed what rested inside.

Her fingers slip over the faux-leather finish of her steering wheel. The ice on the windshield melts gradually and drops down to rest over the wipers.

She starts her car, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. She can see Dr. Smythe inside, through the orange-glow of the glass front door, sliding his scarf over his shoulders and situating his thick wool coat. She smiles softly, switching into reverse and pulling carefully out of her spot. Her car hums quietly over the bump of the parking lot, onto the white-topped street. Her headlights twinkle in the untouched snow, catch on the reflective plastic ghosts that the city council strung from each pole along the road. They're buried under snow as well. Only their crooked little tails peek out recognizably from beneath their new white caps.

The street lamps along her path flicker on as her car trudges, lonely, through the unmarked white pathway towards her apartment complex, left abandoned by the limited amount of evening traffic that already passed through here hours ago. She's late coming home tonight, but Acxa volunteered to watch the kids. It's her day off, and Veronica still isn't sure how to properly thank her for eagerly spending her downtime with her girlfriend's rowdy children.

Veronica finds herself distracted by the white hue of each lamp that she passes, how the puddles that they spill out onto the road and sidewalks still seems out of place after she'd grown accustomed to total blackness last winter. They've been untouched since April, but it seems as though everyone in town is holding their breath.

Veronica knows better. She knows that they won't be broken ever again.

She imagines for a moment that one pops out, that darkness envelops them again. That someone, a man, materializes from the blackness and slips back into her life just long enough to say his goodbyes.

It's a good thought for Halloween, but it doesn't come true. When she returns home, Acxa is helping the kids situate their costumes.

Lance,

The boys are getting bigger. Bigger every single day. We celebrated Halloween a few days early. The town's been on high alert ever since everything went down, even though it's been months now since we've had any further emergencies or mysterious disappearances. And even though whatever the Hell started happening last year didn't even begin until after Thanksgiving, but… You know, let them have their paranoia. Who cares, right? You can never be too careful.

Nadia wanted to be a "shadow person" and I can't even begin to explain to you how difficult it was to put together that costume. Acxa paid for most of it behind my back, the traitor, bought the fabric supposedly on sale and brought over her clunky old sewing machine and taught me how to thread a needle. Nadia ended up looking like some kind of ninja or burglar, and I guess in a few years when she grows out of wearing kid's costumes, maybe we can revamp it to be some kind of cat suit. I'm not sure. But it was hard not to laugh at her. I felt bad. I had to leave the room just to laugh about it where I wouldn't hurt her feelings. I think she might have thought that I was scared or something, because she was really careful about sneaking up on me after that. But I kept thinking about what you'd say, how you'd have gone about putting that costume together, what kinds of inappropriate jokes you'd have made comparing her to that roach that we found behind the toilet when she was still in preschool. Or the oil spots that we find dotting the parking lot sometimes, or… I don't know. I've never been as good at that sort of thing as you are. Never had a knack for improv, I guess.

El ías wanted to be some character from this cartoon that he likes. Some super complicated plastic monstrosity that Acxa and I struggled for an hour to put together just right. I swear, Halloween costumes only get more convoluted every year. Or maybe you'd say that I'm just getting dumb in my old age. And I'd swat at you and tell you that you're not looking so spry yourself anymore, I can hear your joints creaking from across the room. You'd ask me how many little girls come into Dr. Smythe's office and think that I'm a grandma, and I'd tell you that your wrinkles are deeper than the Mariana Trench these days, we'd laugh. We'd keep making snide jokes. You'd smile in that handsome way that always used to remind me of dad...

But, anyway.

Silvio wanted to be a superhero again. Luckily we were able to find the costume at the thrift store around August, since he's such a good planner. He saw it in the store when we were shopping for school clothes and begged me to buy it for him. And, as always, he still wanted it when Halloween rolled around. I have no idea where he got that trait from—being so resolute in his decisions. Lord knows he never got it from either of us, the World Famous Waffling Duo.

Although… You did leave, didn't you?

I guess maybe…

I don't know. Never mind.

"H-hey, how have you been?"

Veronica's smile feels oddly natural as she sorts the small array of sodas and candy that she's selected for purchase along the counter just next to the register. She ignores the monochrome smile left unfaded by the elements on a poster just behind the clerk's head, finding herself woefully unable to meet the eyes of the boy pictured there, wondering, with a stab of misplaced anger in her chest, why this convenience store is still intent on advertising this missing person when it seems that the whole rest of the town has given up.

She compartmentalizes that feeling, shoves it away and tells herself that it isn't appropriate to misdirect those bitter feelings at this boy. This boy who is smiling bashfully at her now, as though he has any reason to feel uncomfortable. As though he's ever done anything wrong since she's known him.

“It’s nice to see you, Hunk,” she says distantly, “I’m… here, I guess—”

She laughs and Hunk’s smile creases downward at the edges.

“I’m getting through every day. How are you, and—and your mother?”

The scanning gun beeps as he begins checking out her items. There aren’t many of them, and it seems that both of them are situated firmly in the same feeling: there isn’t enough time. Veronica knows that she has a lot of things to thank Hunk for. She knows that he was always a good friend to Lance. And she understands that she hasn’t been the most forthcoming since he disappeared, hasn’t been particularly keen on parading herself around this town and reassuring every individual person that they did enough for their family while they still had a chance.

But she also understands that Hunk isn’t a gossipy old lady at church or a clerk at the grocery store who only knew their family through their purchases. She knows that Hunk spent many years with Lance and supported him through things that she might, even to this day, not even know about. She knows that Hunk never reported Lance’s absence that last day to their boss, that he took the responsibility of working a double shift alone without complaint, only concern. Only worry for the friend of his who would inevitably disappear without a single word or a single sign, or a trace of himself left embedded on this town aside from so much lost blood that no human could conceivably survive that sort of physical trauma.

“I’ve been… okay.” Hunk cuts off that train of thought. He sets one of her sodas gently in the bag with her other things. “Mom’s been in remission for a few months now. We still have to make the trips to the hospital, but she’s doing a lot better. She takes pilates now. It’s kinda funny to come home and her whole exercise club is gathered in the living room, you know? Buncha old ladies wrapped around themselves like pretzels. You know, uh…”

The second soda drops with a thunk into the bag. Hunk levels himself with hands against the counter, sucking in a short breath and turning his eyes slowly up to her.

“Lance, um… he used to always tell me that I should take some engineering courses out of town, you know… they have a school in Denver for that sort of thing, so… I’m gonna do that. I’m leaving in the spring. My parents think it’s great, of course, but I think—I—”

“Lance would be proud too.”

Hunk ducks his head, biting his lip. He nods shortly, jerkily, and his eyes raise with wetness glazed over them that Veronica can feel pinching in her heart.

He rings out the remaining items that she’s left on the counter, and once she pays, he tells her,

“My parents are having a going away party at the end of the month if you… you and the kids wanna come? Silvio likes my nephews and, uh… there’s gonna be beer?”

The bag in Veronica’s hand shuffles. Her smile scrunches around her teeth, buried in her bottom lip. She turns her head to the snow falling through the window, the sun hung precariously close to the treeline as her car piles with the beginnings of a new powdery snowfall. She slides her wallet further down into her pocket and tightens her grasp around the handle of her plastic shopping bag.

“I’d love to come,” she tells him, “Just text me the info later, okay?”

Lance,

It’s almost Christmas, can you believe it? It’s been a while since I’ve written and I’m sorry. Although I guess it’ll be even longer before you ever get any of these. Maybe you never will. Maybe that goodbye really was the final goodbye and it’s stupid for me to even hope that someday you’ll just… reappear.

We keep getting those weird cards in the mail. This time, it was a really goofy dollar store card with this reindeer on it. God, this thing had the weirdest googly eyes. The kind of thing that only you would find cute in that creepy way that you liked ugly dogs with underbites and those hideous flat-faced cats. Inside, it read just, “Happy Holidays from our family to yours”, which didn’t make a lot of sense. It still feels like maybe I’m getting someone else’s mail, like some old senile bat 500 miles away thinks that

Veronica McClain is her long lost granddaughter and she keeps sending me hundreds of dollars on the regular just to reach out to me. Who knows, maybe I was adopted or switched at birth or stolen from my rich Queen-slash-fairy godmother-slash-unicorn warrior mother like I'd fantasized about when I got in trouble as a kid.

Funny how you spend so much of your childhood wishing that your family isn't really your family, but then…

Look, I'm not mad anymore. I know sometimes… I mean in most of these letters I come off as pretty severe, right? I didn't, I mean… I'm over it, I guess. Not over missing you, but over being so angry at you about it. It's just, when the kids ask things like, "Should we still buy presents for Uncle Lance, just in case he comes home?" you have to understand that it's hard. It's hard to explain to a kid that their uncle probably isn't ever coming back. It's hard to figure out when you're supposed to tell them that. Nadia says that Santa isn't real if he doesn't give her the top thing on her list, and guess what that is? Guess who she thinks that Santa can miraculously walk through the front door while she's opening her gifts in the morning, or…

Who she thinks is somehow going to be sitting under the tree with a big, fat red bow on his head when she wakes up and runs into the living room?

I just don't think it's fair, that's all. I don't really know what you expected for me to tell them or what you thought I'd do in these situations or if you even thought about it before you just disappeared. I guess… I just thought that we'd have more time. I thought that in your "infinite wisdom" about this whole spooky situation, you'd have taken even just a single minute to consider what life would be like for the kids, at least, when you took off, but… I don't even know why I'm talking like you're still alive out there. As though in any insane universe, you didn't just…

Like somehow you could have planned this. It's insane. I just, I don't know why I keep convincing myself that you did this on purpose when… You're dead. I know that you're dead. There can't possibly be any other reasonable explanation for all of this.

But anyway, with Nadia. Acxa and her psychologist both think that maybe it's time for her. The boys don't talk about you like you're gone forever, like… they just can't really understand it, I guess. Silvio always says, "When Uncle Lance gets back from his trip" when he talks about the future, and El ías… I don't know. He doesn't talk about it. But he won't take the bus anymore. When the school year started, out of nowhere, he began throwing fits when we tried to see him off at the stop. He'd cry so hard that I really thought that he was having a panic attack. He was so red, almost purple. Frantic. Screaming so loud that my ears popped.

The kids aren't really the same. They're okay, but… They just aren't the same.

Nadia has both of them talking about the shadow man now. That's the only thing that they play anymore. Shadow man and Uncle Lance. They say that you're having adventures with him all over the world now. Whisked away in the middle of the morning by a man made out of darkness. It's the spookiest thing, but they sleep more peacefully. I can calm El ías down in an instant if I reassure him that the shadow man isn't coming back for us. I don't think it's healthy, but who am I to say, I guess. What do I know, and if it helps…

Anyway, we talked to Nadia about Santa. She wasn't even phased at all. I guess we always knew that she was suspecting things, especially since Uncle Lance's favorite cookies were always the only ones eaten on Santa's plate. She seemed to be so "over it" though, I bet you would have gotten a kick out of it.

"I know, mama," She said, in this flippant voice like I was trying to tell her that unicorns weren't real either. Like she's just so "grown-up" now that it would be ridiculous to expect a nine-year-old to still believe in Santa.

Acxa made eggnog from scratch for all of us, made the kids some hot chocolate and we hosted a small Christmas party with Dr. Smythe and a few of the friendlier officers from Acxa's work. Detective Iverson is a good man, gruff and a little standoffish, but he talked to me about your case. About… all of the blood in the carpet. About Detective Sanda disappearing too. She didn't have a next of kin, so he took the liberty of collecting some of her things and sorting which things would go to charity, which things would need to be thrown away. He offered me some of the family photos of

you and the kids that she'd apparently kept in her office, but can you imagine?

I felt bad about laughing at even the concept of hanging some of Sanda's creepy hate-shrine photos in our living room, but Acxa was very liberal about how much rum she added to the adult's eggnog. But he let me go through the box anyway. He stopped by the house a few days later with a ton of files in the back of his car. There was this photo of you and Ryou near the middle of the "Evidence" stack, and…

It was beautiful, Lance. The look on your face when you smiled up at him, the way that he touched your shoulder. Like the frames of a cartoon spliced and spread out, she had you shot-by-shot. Leaning closer, stood up on the tips of your toes, kissing that man. It was dark and the snow was so thick around you. White and black and both of you saturated in the center of all of it. Spotlighted and frozen there as though you could step out of the paper or turn up and smile at me, too.

I kept that one. It's framed now in the living room.

There was a journal as well, tucked at the bottom of the box. And the entries were all about you, about Ryou, about a man named Takashi and about a dozen other pseudonyms that were probably just regular, innocent people. The lady was batshit, Lance. Totally off her rocker, but…

Near the end, almost the last entry, she started rambling about these voices and some animal that left the carcass of its prey in the driver's seat of her car. And she talked about this… "shadow creature" that whispered to her. Obviously, I didn't tell the kids.

Obviously, I couldn't do that to them, but… It's crazy, right? Like, no matter how much you hear about something so absolutely insane, you can't just start believing in it or you're liable to become just as nuts as that Sanda lady. But they just managed to finish repairing all of the broken lights around town. No one has messed with them since you disappeared. It doesn't feel as dark, either, even though it's already started snowing again. It doesn't feel as absolutely silent, doesn't feel as full and alive as it did last year until you were gone, and I don't know if I'm overthinking things but Lance…

Did you…

“I was thinking that we could paint the spare bedroom if the landlord signs off on it. Although it seems that he’ll agree to pretty much anything after…”

Acxa allows that thought to trail off, stretched languidly next to Veronica on the bed, bathed in the soft glow of the nightstand lamp as Veronica skims the next paragraph of the novel in her hands. She thinks about that empty bedroom and what Acxa might have planned for it—a home office was the most popular pick at first, then a workout room, then a playroom for the kids. She wonders what the decision is this week, and how many days will pass before any of them are brave enough to shove open the still-closed door and actually commit to redecorating it.

“None of the kids want to go in there,” Veronica reminds her, as though she even needs reminding. Acxa’s expression stays even, eyes on the ceiling. She traces shadowed lines that Veronica can’t make out from her position next to her, that become so fuzzy and dizzying over the rim of her glasses that she finds solace between the uniform printed words in her book instead.

“We could always just move to a different apartment.”

Acxa still isn’t looking at her, and Veronica isn’t sure if she’d feel any better about this conversation if she were. Acxa doesn’t mention the mysterious letters or the memories encased here, doesn’t bring up how unhealthy she’s mentioned in the past that it probably is to exist in this sarcophagus of Lance McClain that the entire family has built in his wake. They’d donated his bed frame and shelves months ago, and Veronica had sobbed during the entirety of the drive home. She’d kept a few of his favorite shirts tucked in a plastic tote that she stores in the closet, taking up space that they don’t really have. Sneaking in there on nights when Acxa works late and the kids have long since gone to sleep, to crack open the corners and feel the fabric, and smell the residual scent that her brother used to trail around the apartment: his various body lotions and colognes. His face wash that always left behind the most subtle smell of mint. That starchy bite of the cleaning supplies that he worked with so often at the convenience store and the middle school that he seemed to wear the smell of it like a second skin.

Veronica feels petty for drowning herself in these memories, but she isn't sure even now if she's ready to let go completely just yet. She feels like one of those mother apes on TV, clutching the corpse of its young. Violent and outraged at the mere prospect of a zookeeper taking away the body before it decomposes, thinking that maybe if she buries her fingers for long enough in Lance's memories, it might conjure him back into existence again.

She rubs at her eyes, sniffs sharply and lifts her gaze to the ceiling to block the flow of hot tears welled up at the base of her eyelids.

Acxa draws out a long sigh. She reaches forward and places a gentle hand on Veronica's shoulder.

"When you're ready," she says, "We don't have to do anything until you're ready."

Happy Spring, Lance.

It's been almost a year since you've been gone.

The snow is still falling pretty heavily, so as per usual, it's a sorry excuse for Spring if I ever saw one. And I know that you'd be complaining about it if you were here now. It always did seem to get under your skin that this place isn't capable of having "real weather" as you called it. Which we always knew just meant a hot summer. As though there are even any beaches around here where you could camp out like you'd always dreamed of.

I hope that you're actually out there somewhere and not… well, not out there. I hope you're somewhere with sandy beaches and a bright, hot sun, and daytime that lasts so long that maybe it might feel like night passes in the blink of an eye. I hope you spend your days with Ryou, too, and that the two of you can build sandcastles and sip margaritas by the waterside, and that you're happy. That you smile more with him than you ever did here. That you're finally far enough away from all of this that maybe you can breathe freely. I didn't understand back then, when you disappeared and the cops searched Ryou's apartment, why some of your things were just… gone.

I mean your blood was everywhere. It was so stained in the carpet that they even had to pull up some of the ruined floorboards underneath when they refurbished the place. But your bag was gone, and your cell phone. The phone company could only really give me your call records, but obviously, that yielded nothing. Just some short conversations from your job and that friend of yours, Hunk. One weird call from a phone booth near where they found Officer Sendak's body, which… isn't really a surprise. I told the cops that I had no idea about any of it, obviously. It's not like they were going to question me, given the circumstances. Not even like I could have been reasonable during a time like that. I didn't even think about the correlation until days later. And I definitely wasn't calling the station once I thought about how weird it was, but how much it made sense. In the end, I guess you really were at the center of everything, but even now…

It's like I have all of these pieces of a puzzle, but none of them were made to click together. Every connecting piece is missing. Everything that would make any of this clearer is just gone. And… that's okay. I don't think I'd even want to figure it out anymore. The kids are doing better. They still talk about that shadow man sometimes, but Nadia is doing well in school. She isn't getting in trouble anymore, and she doesn't draw any weird pictures in class. She still included you in the family photo that she colored, shoved between me and Acxa with a big crayon smile. Of course, her teacher didn't say anything about it. She's a nice lady this year. You would have liked her, I think. You would have been happy to see that she really gets a kick out of Nadia's love of monsters and Halloween. She even let her help hang up the orange and black streamers and doodle some spooky ghosts to paste around the classroom.

It's good to stay busy, and the kids have been.

I got another card in the mail yesterday. "Happy Spring!" written in loopy, floral-printed letters. There was $500 inside, not surprising. My fairy godmother living somewhere in Arizona, this time, must be really loaded. You know when we were kids and they'd show us that big picture of the declaration of independence on the projector in class, and the writing would be so winding and ornate that it was almost hard to read the words? Like, somehow it just cemented this idea that people hundreds of years ago were so much more refined than they are now? Like, almost speaking another language, words written in an almost indecipherable hand. That's what the writing on the card looked like. Like, somehow the person who signs these cards was picked up from the 1800s and planted firmly in this year. And in their immortal wisdom, they decided to sit down and write me a card, which is weird, because…

There's always been this part of me that's kinda hoped that you were sending them, but that's not your messy handwriting. It can't be you, unless you're traveling now with some dusty old person who signs off all of your mail for you. Like maybe for the sake of me not alerting the cops that you're definitely still out there and I have your handwriting to prove it, you decided to ask some 19th-century zombie to write your messages instead. Which I guess might not be super unrealistic if I'm already thinking that you're alive now and not rotting in the bottom of a river somewhere. Which, the lakes are all thawing out now. People have started hunting and hiking again.

Iverson called me the other day to tell me that they're still searching for Detective Sanda. That apartment was painted with your blood, but there was nothing but a few small dots of hers and some hair and skin samples. Not enough to rule it as a death, I guess. Enough though, to know that she was there.

The station doesn't want to officially label her as the murderer, but you can tell that she's already been found guilty around town.

It's funny, the way that people talk about you now that they think that you're dead.

"He was such a good kid", "He had so much potential."

"His smile could light up an entire room."

Where was that kindness while you were alive, right? Everyone is always so much more romantic when you're gone. You'd have thought that you were some kind of small town Jesus from the way that these people talk about you.

And I know that they're just trying to make me feel better. I know that they're doing their best to comfort me, but…

I'm not sure if I even think that you're…

I don't know.

I'm not sure what I believe anymore.

Veronica ties off the end of Nadia's newly braided hair, pulling back to grab the small mirror that she's set next to her and passing to down for Nadia to inspect her work herself. Nadia squeals in excitement, shoving up and hugging her tightly before wiping off the seat of her pants and taking off down the hall to finish her morning routine. It's early enough in the morning that Veronica herself is surprised that her fingers were able to work so deftly, but she still smiles smugly as Acxa, who failed at the same task just moments prior, sends her an unamused look from across the room.

"Which boy do you think she's trying to impress today?"

Acxa hands her a lukewarm mug of coffee as she asks. Veronica laughs, settling back carefully into her seat and taking a short drink.

"She has three right now, right? I bet it's Luke this week, maybe Trevon next week. Maybe she'll mix it up and come home talking about Diego's pretty eyes again."

The two of them laugh together for a moment after that, Acxa drumming her fingers lightly against the side of her own mug, Veronica, cozy and contented and still half-asleep as she makes herself more comfortable on the living room chair. They listen to the children chatting from down the hall as Veronica gazes through the kitchen at the yellow sunlight, catching dust particles through the finger smudges on the sliding glass door. She wishes that she could tell Lance that she quit smoking. She wishes that he could know that after all this time, she kicked that habit and converted the balcony into a sitting area where she and Acxa share coffee in the mornings when it isn't too cold to spend time outside.

There are a lot of things that she wishes that she could tell him, as Acxa sees the kids off and she slips into her bedroom, opening the drawer of the nightstand next to her bed, running her fingers over the worn leather spine of a journal that she's been writing in since he disappeared last year.

She pulls the pen from a slot in the binding, clicking the end of it as she thumbs open a page.

The morning light filters through her dark curtains. Outside, she can hear the school bus chugging down the street, crows cawing, the birds that left for winter crying out overhead as they return now for the frigid spring.

Her fingers find an empty page, three left until it reaches its end.

And she writes a final message, wondering idly when she should talk to the landlord about painting the spare bedroom.

It's been a year, Lance. I still miss you and I still love you, but…

I think we're gonna be okay.

And wherever you are, whoever you're with, whatever you're doing out there…

I hope you're gonna be okay too.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A silver car crawls quietly down a wide, empty highway at dusk.

The road is due for maintenance, neglected with deep potholes embedded in the asphalt and foliage overgrown at the steep crevices of drainage holes just where grassy terrain meets the street. Its border is decorated inordinately with gnarled weeds and corn stalks, long forgotten, collapsed over themselves from the weight of their own borne fruit. The rotten smell of their deterioration is heavy in the muggy summer air as the sun overhead boils together that death-scent and the earthy, biting taste that churns in the dead water collected and breeding multitudes of mosquitos just under a lengthy cage of wild grass. Dust piles along the sides of the vehicle from where the tires spin on uneven gravel. Nicolás Morikawa props his elbow on the window sill, spreading his hand wide and catching the air as it whips through his open fingers. His socked feet are perched atop the dashboard, and his other hand rests on his knee. The seat belt strapped over his chest digs a little through his shirt, starchy and too stiff in a new car that's been given none of the proper time to be broken in before they began taking this extended road trip in it.

On his left hand, the diamond of his wedding ring glistens in the waning orange-cast of the sun. Spots of light bound from the stark, straight lines carved into the stone, speckled on the interior of the car and catching Hideaki's eye in the driver's seat. His attention draws to it in intervals, his eyes spotted and lit up in their murky depths by the refractions of it that glide gently over the high bones of his pale cheeks and his upturned lips, and the single hand that he holds against the steering wheel as he guides them lazily through the endless path of this overgrown and long-forgotten stretch of rural road. When Nicolás catches him looking, he can't stop himself from smiling, lifting the stone to his face, and inspecting the way that it glimmers in a dozen shades of deflected color from the sun, and the gray interior of the car, and his own blue eyes reflected back to him much smaller from this mini-mirror taken refuge on his finger.

"You know," he says eventually, dropping his head to rest against the seat and sprawling out as languidly as he can in such a confined space. Outside, the wind continues to whip against the side of the car

and his spread fingers. It tousles his hair and stripes against his sweaty skin under his loose t-shirt. Around them, a quiet melody thrums through the speakers by their feet. Hideaki looks to him, glances in short bursts while keeping his eye on the empty expanse of highway ahead of them.

Nicolás draws in a breath before he continues. He presses the diamond of his ring to his lips, mapping out the sensation of the creases against his skin.

“I always wanted to get married someday,” he says, “I always thought that I would. Some things just feel right, I guess. Like, choosing to scoop the chocolate ice cream in Neapolitan. Like putting garlic on chicken. Choosing the melee fighter in a video game. Getting married always felt right too, I guess. Saying, “my husband” or “my wife” when talking about some person who I decided to settle down with. I seem like husband material, right? Like someone who should be married?”

Hideaki’s smile stretches out broader. He looks as though he might want to reach forward and rest a hand on Nicolás’s knee, to twine together their fingers or run his lips over Nicolás’s knuckles and feel the indentations of his ring, too, but his left hand is occupied with the steering wheel, and on the wrong side to reach. He settles instead with a soft laugh, a short nod of his head, and distant eyes watching the road ahead as though he might be picking through memories somewhere in the gravel that Nicolás can’t make out.

“You are married,” he says, “In every way that matters.”

Nicolás heaves a heavy sigh, decidedly petulant but still smiling. He rearranges himself so that his back rests against the window and the door, so that his long legs can reach over the cup holders and the storage cubby and his feet can make a home for themselves in Hideaki’s lap.

“So Santa Monica was the honeymoon, huh? Is that our excuse for hanging out there for the last eight months before actually going to New Orleans?”

Hideaki laughs again. He drums his fingers against the steering wheel.

“We had to get the car,” he says softly, as though Nicolás might not actually know, as though he isn’t just teasing for the sake of saying words to fill the quiet, “Plus, you seemed like you really needed to see the beach.”

Nicolás nods, bites his lip in a show that he suspects is just as flirty and coy to Hideaki as he's hoping that it looks, then puffs out his cheeks, blowing a shallow whistle of air into the quiet between them. He then finagles himself so that he can grab his vitamin water from the cup holder, fumbling with the soft plastic and the lid that's been turned off of its tracks before he takes a long swig of it. It's warm now, not quite as satisfying as he was hoping for. The flavor tastes more like juice that's been sitting out long enough that the ice has melted and watered it down. He grimaces at it, recapping it more carefully and sliding it into its spot. He'll buy something better next time, next stop. He'll be more dutiful in his pursuit of a drink that doesn't leave a sticky fake fruity aftertaste on his tongue that quenches no thirst and leaves him in a more desperate need to wash his mouth out.

He squints through the windshield at the slow descent of the sun beyond the looming trees in the distance. It's perfectly centered to eye level. It hurts to focus in its direction for too long. Hideaki seems to share this sentiment, as he pulls his hand from the wheel for a short moment to pluck his sunglasses from the collar of his shirt and slide them up the bridge of his nose. Nicolás isn't surprised to find that he looks handsome like this too, as though his face were crafted to be perfectly accented by the addition of such a simple accessory. As though at any moment now, the commercial music will begin playing and the narrator will announce whatever brand of sunglasses Hideaki, the model, is trying to sell. Cheap plastic ones from the Conoco station back in Portales. A silly blue-rimmed, too small pair that was the only slightly better alternative to the shutter shades that Lance didn't even know were still sold in stores.

He almost laughs at the idea of it. Almost voices what a ridiculous notion it is, before he doesn't. Before, instead, he elects to stay quiet and enjoy the feeling of Hideaki's firm body under his feet, cradling his legs, and the sleepy sort of peace that's settled over both of them after so many long hours spent driving.

He watches the crawl of the car through the dusty road and the leisurely drop of the sun beyond the dark blurred silhouette of the trees. If he had to guess, he'd wager that they're nearing central Louisiana now, nearly arrived at their destination but surely tucking in for the night before they manage to get there. Hideaki's connection, that had somehow secured him a new car and the I.D.s that they'd needed to sign for it, has already reserved a rental home for them in the deep rural woods of New Orleans. Nicolás isn't entirely sure how he'd come to know such a person in the first place, but he's well

beyond questioning the nuances of this lifestyle, focused, instead, on grasping this life and squeezing every ounce of enjoyment that he possibly can from it. As though he doesn't have many years ahead of him to do just that. As though he could possibly be running out of time.

In reality, eternity still feels surreal. It still feels as though it might end someday, in a far future that's still so many years away that he isn't sure if it's even worth counting. His hand subconsciously rests over the twin indentation of a scar on one side of his throat, wider and uglier than its small brother on the opposite side. It's a pale-colored, jagged displacement of flesh there. It looks more like a skin tag or an unfortunate birthmark than the violent reality that had severed his vocal cords and filled his throat with blood before he'd been dragged back to life. It's a sole memento left over from the last human breath that he took months ago, a braille message chiseled in his flesh that reads back to him exactly what he's overcome to be here, as he is, now.

Nicolás Morikawa is the name that's printed next to an awkward photo of him on a driver's license in his wallet. It's the name scrawled sloppily in the signature line of his marriage papers. It's the identity that he's grown into over the prior months, still a little shaky and unpracticed, but learning gradually to answer to as naturally as Hideaki has come to suit the new skin that he's draped over himself as well.

But last year, he was Lance McClain. He was nineteen and not twenty-two. He was a janitor at a middle school and a convenience store clerk, and a part-time, online student floating aimlessly through the endless throes of young adulthood, uncertain as to where he'd go from there. And admittedly, it doesn't feel as depressing as he might have anticipated, shedding that old skin, becoming someone new with endless possibilities ahead of him. Shiro's identity dealer had been kind enough to fit him with an associate's degree in general studies, which he isn't positive about the uses of, but he has a good enough feeling about anyway. Hideaki, Shiro, has told him many times that he doesn't need to work, but he wonders if he'll get restless sitting around the house during the quiet mornings while Keith is asleep. He's been roving the job listings online and he thinks that he'd like to work somewhere more social, where he might be free to converse with the locals and feel more connected in the community, despite Shiro's warnings that he'll need to keep a safe distance from anyone who he meets.

Anymore, it hasn't been difficult to keep Keith fed, and they both know it, have been allowed many months since they left Colorado to practice their routine feedings to get the hang of them. With little to no accidents and nothing more than close calls, Lance knows that they're entering this new part of their lives as prepared as they possibly can be, in what looks to be their optimal situation, together, finally, after planning this for so much time.

He's confident in their ability to stay safe this time, feels now that he has no good reason to misstep since he's been given the proper opportunity to grow acclimated to the changes in himself, as a new immortal, and the lifestyle that he spent so much time preparing himself for before he was unceremoniously crashed into it. He feels a hollow pang in his chest when he thinks about the state in which he left his old life, the things he never got to say, the people who he was never given that final chance to talk to. There's another card addressed to his old apartment tucked inside of the pocket of his bag on the floor, and Shiro has reassured him that they'll stop before they reach their new home town and slip it into a letterbox on their way.

Keith had rolled his eyes when Lance had asked him to sign it "Happy Birthday, my little Veve-bee" as though he'd known perfectly well how Veronica would also heave a heavy sigh at his terrible sense of humor. He'd still written the words in that loopy, ornate hand that, as of late, Lance finds is an addictive show to watch. He'd told Keith about videos online where people show off their penmanship, had held the card close to his face and inspected each swirling letter written fantastically in a cheap pen that he'd accidentally pilfered from a restaurant, and he'd told Keith that he could probably become internet famous with that kind of writing. Keith hadn't found it nearly as impressive as he had, however, even when he'd written his own note on a scrap piece of paper and compared the two. But anymore, Lance has noticed Keith's little glances in his direction when he fills out the cards for him, tentative and just a little shy as though he's eager to earn his admiration each time that Lance hands him a pen and paper.

The cards and the fleeting packages have been a welcome distraction, a nice way to vent his frustrations and his longing and the ache in his chest when he thinks about never seeing Veronica and the kids again. But it still stings as much as Shiro had warned him months ago, when he thinks about the fact that he won't ever see his sister's kids grow up. When he considers that sending these letters will be the closest that he ever comes to staying in contact with them, and there's no returning there now that he's gone. There's never going to be a letter

sent back to him. He'll never be positive that they've even opened the mail or received them at all.

He knows that his disappearance was aired on the news for weeks after they fled. He knows that the police never recovered the car in the hiding place where Shiro stowed it, in a remote ravine in the deepest depths of a hiking trail between Nevada and California, before they ended their journey over the border on foot overnight. That they might never recover Sanda's remains rotting in scattered trash bags all throughout their path out of the state, drained dry and nearly indistinguishable as a human anymore when Lance had peeked into one of the bags and felt his stomach turn at the sight of a severed, dehydrated set of arms with fingerprints sliced from the tips of gnarled fingers.

Lance hadn't been coherent enough to remember much of that journey until he'd awoken in a frenzy in the back seat of the car somewhere between Rangely, Colorado and Vernal, Utah. He feels guiltily thankful that he won't be kept awake at night by whatever Keith did to Sanda as maybe Shiro will. He knows that it was a violent sight, that Keith himself was terrified and thrown haphazardly into the situation when he was barely even rested enough to understand what was going on.

Keith had wandered off for two nights after to be by himself, to think about their situation and how brutally he'd ended that woman's life. Lance hadn't given himself the opportunity to consider prior that perhaps Keith didn't really want to kill anyone. That he'd disappointed himself when his instincts had overridden his sense of logic and humanity and he'd reacted to the hot burn of sun suddenly spilled over him and Lance's bloodied body on the floor across the living room in an animalistic way that perhaps, in his own head, only cemented his paranoid, self-defeating suspicions that he could train himself like a dog or a circus monkey to perform humanly, but deep down, he'd always just be the same feral beast.

Shiro and Lance had pulled him back on the third night and talked to him. He'd been quiet and dismissive of their concerns. He'd flicked his eyes incessantly on the dark woods surrounding their camping spot, as though any moment, he'd grow tired of the heart-to-heart and thrust himself into the trees to escape it. Even Shiro had been a little clumsy when it came to talking about the difficult things, a little rough around the edges in the context of just the sort of conversation that he and Keith had always tiptoed around in the past. But Lance had found that he hadn't been afraid of Keith then, hadn't secretly nursed

insecurity that Keith truly was a wild creature only inhibited by the cage that they'd crafted around him, and instead, those negative feelings had been overflowed and washed out by a sense of stern admiration for the person who had grabbed him from the bowels of death and dragged him back to life.

He'd voiced these thoughts and Keith had laughed at him, barked a dry crack of that false amusement as though he didn't buy it even one bit. But things had been different after that. They didn't talk about Sanda anymore. Keith's eyes would often linger on the twin punctures at Lance's throat, the scars left behind from that blade. And he'd allow himself to be held longer by Shiro, he'd linger closer to their campsites in the trees even when he left for the evenings to exercise.

In the end, as he'd always promised, Keith took care of it. Sanda wasn't going to stop on her own. It was an unavoidable tragedy that in Lance's own opinion, only came about because Sanda wished for it to be that way. She could have dropped it when the Sendak case was closed. She could have decided at any point to leave them alone. Keith was an instrument used in her demise but not the harbinger of it. When put in a fight or flight situation, Keith was the only one among the three of them capable of protecting them from harm.

But these things are long done, and Lance tells himself that in time even the deepest scars of the past will fade completely from his skin. He might think of the feeling of that knife plunged inside of him each time that he undresses to shower or to change for bed, running his fingers over the spidery, vein-like splinters of scars spanned out where he was torn apart and Keith mended him. Or maybe someday his skin will fade to match a more natural shade, as Shiro's had long ago. Maybe someday he'll look just like everyone else again. Maybe someday, he'll learn to live so naturally with this condition that it will be hard for anyone to sense that change in him. Only time will tell, he thinks. Even Shiro doesn't seem to have a finite answer to that specific question.

For now, Lance enjoys the feeling of Shiro so nearby, and he breathes deeply, drawing in the thick smell of corn and rotten greenery, the summer scents dropped heavily over the flat expanse of this endless stretch of road like a blanket of dewy wind, of fireflies, of crows baying overhead and the pink splotches of the sun setting far in the distance to make way for the evening grays and dark, inky black. Lance remembers, for a brief flash of a moment, a time years ago when he might have cried out to his mother and father and begged them to keep the hall light on while he slept. There's an ache there

too, in his chest when he considers it. There's a feeling now as though the cork has finally been stuffed down the neck of his model ship bottle and there's no escaping from it. He might never see his mother and father again, even if an afterlife exists. He's sealed himself off in this glass prison that smells like rotten corn and sounds like birds cawing and bugs buzzing and feels like Shiro's warm and soft body propping up his legs.

He doesn't know if he should mourn that old possibility or not. If he should feel guilty now for shedding an ingrown life and starting anew as a different person without it.

There aren't any how-to guides about living the rest of his eternity as an immortal. This isn't the kind of thing that Nicolás Morikawa would have learned at community college while he was getting his gen ed associate's degree.

Shiro reaches awkwardly around to turn up the volume of the music. There's a heavy thump from the trunk and many rustling, angry sounds as the creature that they're hosting in the dark back of the car is startled suddenly awake by the blare of it. Shiro winces then, gritting his teeth and accidentally veering the car far off to the opposite side of the road as he fumbles to wrench the volume knob back down. He blindly snaps his head behind him as though he might be able to catch a pair of dark eyes watching him through the rearview mirror and apologize. Lance covers for him, grabs the wheel with one hand at record speed and jerks them in the right direction. Another heavy thump booms from the trunk, the creature inside thrown wildly within it when the car jerks unexpectedly, and Lance, too, hisses through tightly-clasped teeth. Someone, in their mess of tangled hands and wild cursing and sudden lapping guilt, manages to turn the volume down before Shiro reclaims ownership of the wheel and rights them.

And silence fills the car for a long moment, until finally, Lance laughs.

"Whoops," he says, brows pushed high up at his forehead, "The new car has speakers in the trunk, too, doesn't it? I wonder why that is?"

"Probably to mess with us, personally." Shiro's statement is peppered with a light laugh as well. His cheeks and throat are splotched with color that Lance decides looks very charming on his skin. His fingers drum out the remainder of his anxiety against the steering wheel. His teeth bury themselves in his bottom lip as his body hums with sudden, nervous jitters.

“He’s going to give us an earful when we let him out.”

Lance’s head drops against the headrest again. He raps his knuckles against the window sill.

“Leave him in there until he calms down then.” It’s a joke, and Shiro snorts accordingly. Lance knows that the creature currently confined to the trunk wouldn’t stay there any longer than it absolutely wanted to, and there’s nothing that either of them could really do to keep it there. There was a time, years ago, before Lance was even born, when it had torn steel from a stoplight pole where it had wrapped around the distorted body of a dying man, caught in its jaws. There was a time more recently, when it tore a man from his joints as though he were nothing but a plastic doll, flesh from muscle and muscle from bone and shattered femurs so thick that they might have been as big around as Lance’s entire arm. And it had taken down prey twice its size with ease, without even a scratch. Could maybe, if left to its own devices, mow down entire armies that stumbled into its path.

But it chooses, instead, to hide away in the trunk of a new car. It sleeps, now fitfully, until the sun creeps wholly behind the horizon and Shiro flips on the headlights. Lance closes his eyes and listens to the distorted chirping of the crickets whipping past. He allows moist evening air to rustle through his hair and settle over the sweat at his brow, over his tired eyelids, over the exposed expanse of his scar-tracked throat.

Shiro hums a melody that he isn’t familiar with, something lilting and soft that tugs him closer to the edge of sleep. It reminds him of a time when he was still a child, under the low-hanging moon in Cuba, drawn so near that Lance, once upon a time, might have thought that he could really reach out and tear a piece from it like the cheese in all of his favorite cartoons. There’s a memory just on the tip of his thoughts, but he stays distant from it. Careful and guarded and mindful not to ruin this serene moment by breaking his own heart. Shiro hums softly and drums his fingers, and Lance forces himself to hesitate just steps away from that memory of warm hands on his cheeks, soft lips pressed at the line of his forehead into his hair. And a voice, gentle dark eyes, lullabies and a long series of *‘I love you’* s that he’ll never hear in that exact same voice for the rest of his endless life.

There is a certain finality to eternity that he grows acquainted with only in this moment, now, after months of chasing an endless forever that felt propped only centimeters from his fingertips. There’s an ending to an old self at the beginning of the new—the death of an old

Lance who might have lived as though he was given only a short lapse of time to experience the universe, and the birth of a new him who now might be able to achieve anything if given the right amount of years. There was a Lance, once, as a child, who might have thought that heaven could welcome him with his parents patiently waiting. A Lance who believed that time was like the taillights that he used to watch down the dark road through his bedroom window, there, close, for a short moment, and growing distant and harder to catch. Until, eventually, it would disappear into the night. There was a Lance who thought that he would grow older and his time would grow shorter. The years would pass, at first, like the gradual drop of honey from a spoon into hot tea. Then as he grew older, they'd whisk by faster and faster, until he'd watch his entire existence unwind in a span of moments that might have felt like only a month. He'd have his own children and his own family in the blink of an eye once Veronica's kids grew up. He'd work a steady career and own a house with a small yard and a white fence, buried beneath the snow there. And he'd watch himself age like paper left to bleed out in the sun. Like the missing person posters of his own face that he'd seen on the news, over time, he'd grow lighter and lighter until he wasn't even visible anymore.

But now, there's just forever. Endless everything. Shiro and the creature in the trunk angrily offering a loud thump each time that they run over potholes and stray rocks in the road. A restless thing that ties Lance now to this universe forever. A creature that's never known a life before all of this, that's never learned what it feels like to be running out of time. That could never understand, no matter how much Lance could try to explain it, how it might feel to be born and begin dying moments after gasping his first breath and opening his eyes to a bright and disorienting temporary world.

And he wonders guiltily if Keith would sacrifice the immortality to be human. He wonders if that even matters, and if it matters to Keith.

It's hard to say. He hasn't ever asked him. But his heart aches with the weight of it, and when Shiro glances over and catches his eyes, staring distantly at the long winding black of the looming highway ahead of them, he seems to find something there that concerns him.

"How are you holding up, Lance?"

His voice is timid and quiet. Gentle, like he's ushering a feral cat from its hiding place in some bushes to sniff his outstretched hand.

Lance shakes his head, breathing deeply to emulate a yawn and rubbing at his eyes as though the dampness there might be because of sleepiness and not a sudden onslaught of emotions that frankly aren't appropriate given that they're so close to finally achieving the goal that they'd set out for themselves nearly a year ago now.

"I'm fine," he says long and lowly, deceptively sleepy in a way that he suspects isn't as convincing as it should be, "Just tired. Ready to buy a real bed. Gets a little old sleeping in the car, you know? Especially since Keith's stuck in the trunk."

Shiro nods, his lips curling up at the corners in a small smile. They're nearing another exit sign that glows translucent blue in the headlights. Lance squints through the black dots of dead bugs on the windshield to read the blocky white letters and the logos on its face. It seems that they'll be eating a gas station dinner again tonight. Just a single Texaco and a family diner that's probably already closed. He expects the rhythmic click of the blinker before Shiro flips it. His stomach rumbles with hunger despite how desperately he'd love to eat anything but bloated, plastic-wrapped deli sandwiches and drink something that hasn't been sitting in a cooler in a plastic bottle for a few weeks before he blindly grabs it.

And if Shiro orders a tuna again—he shakes his head, jaw tightening. He's sleeping in the trunk with Keith.

Their routine over the last eight months or so has been simple enough, reminiscent of many college road trip movies that he's watched in the past. They sleep in the car often, tucked in the scorching summer heat and bug-bitten upon waking in the morning. Sung to sleep by a cacophony of cricket-song and the soft hooting of owls in distant, shuddering trees, and the baying of coyotes in the dark, endless highway night. They spend mornings picking at warm remains of whatever dinner they'd left untouched during the previous evening. Sometimes Shiro buys a small pack of cold beers from the gas stations that they inhabit habitually these days, and the two of them lean against the trunk of his car and drink quietly while Shiro smokes, while Keith wanders the trees and explores the long, warm, thrumming nights. California, with its soft beaches and tepid, lapping ocean shores had been a much-needed and well-deserved vacation, but it hadn't quite been home. Lance had found during the evenings when he waited tables and the mornings when he tucked himself in a shoddy live-in motel bedroom with Shiro and Keith, that he'd already set his heart on a specific set of coordinates in the country, and the days spent toiled away distractedly did nothing to satiate the ever-

present need to move on.

Shiro hadn't ever been secretive about the fact that they were only staying temporarily. Just long enough to allow the dust back in Colorado to settle, long enough that they'd know for certain that no one would find his car sunk in a trench in the deep woods until long after they'd shirked off their old skin and received their new identification from Pigeon. Long after he'd managed to get his hands on a car that didn't require too much registration or paper trail to obtain.

Lance had jokingly suggested that they get a convoy van to transport their things more easily, and part of him had worried that Shiro might actually take him up on that later on. But in the end, he'd settled on a sleek newer model four-door, a quiet fuel efficient thing with plenty of trunk space and heated seats, although lately, Lance hasn't felt the need arise to actually test them out. He's almost forgotten by now what it had felt like to be cold, almost can't even connect anymore to a version of himself that fretted so terribly over his skin in the blistering frigid winters in the mountains. He's disconnected from that human drive these days, even less than a year later, feels suddenly as though he might be able to be as bold as Keith and traipse around in barely any clothes if he could just shed his dignity, too.

The changes in him have been subtle, but he's noticed them, been caught off guard by them, each time that he's glimpsed his reflection in a mirror. His eyes in the rearview are icier blue, sharper and pointed and focused in a way that he isn't sure that he ever felt back home. It could be just the sheer amount of good sleep that he's gotten since he stopped working so much, supplemented by the immortality that he can feel humming like electricity inside of him. But he feels less tired, less hungry, less cold. He feels more sensitive to the morning sun and the warmth of it, and finds that he'd much rather spend time awake in the evening in the dark. That suddenly, he can understand perfectly well why Shiro removed so many bulbs from the apartment back in Colorado.

In the glove box, if he were to reach forward to dig through it, he might be able to find his phone. The light of which, he knows, is a little too bright for his sensitive eyes now that the sun has set and they've been wrapped in protective, comfortable dark. The SIM card, many months ago, was removed and destroyed, but the photos remain, accompanied by the memories and the few games and the log of received text messages that his heart aches when he thinks about never responding to.

Shiro hadn't judged him for taking it with him. He hadn't acted as though it was a materialization of his own weakness when he hadn't been strong enough to destroy the phone as well. He's spent many evenings on the road flipping through the photos, snapping a few others of himself and Shiro during their trip, clicking his tongue in frustration when Keith is forever cemented in his data as nothing but a black blur of shadow in place of any cute little frown that he might make in person. It seems that he was right before, when he'd thought that perhaps Nadia's drawing might be the only physical representation that Keith existed and continues to exist, but he tells himself that it's okay. He doesn't need a photo to know that Keith will always be there, crawling through the woods at night or tucked safely in the trunk, existing now as the sole tether that ties himself and Shiro to this world for the remainder of an endless forever.

But their journey so far has been cataloged in a myriad of road trip photos that he's taken, immortalized with garish filters and cute stickers that he's stamped over them, as though all of this really could be just for fun. As though it's less life and death and more of a trip that they've taken casually, without purpose, aimless and hopeful and yielding nothing but fond memories that light their way during a long and miserable drive.

He knows that there's a rental home waiting for them when they arrive in their new town. He knows that Shiro's told him again and again that from now on, things will be okay.

But it's hard to shrug off the dread entirely, to believe that anything could be this simple. To think, once and for all, that the worst is over and moving forward, nothing will ever be as bad as it's been ever again.

The crickets outside sing a symphony of varied buzzes and chirps and cries, mingled together in a near-solid wall of noise as Shiro slows the car to a lurch over a wide corner, as his blinker pops and Lance watches the dust and the bugs floating in the heavy beam of the headlights, stabbed into the thick Louisiana summer heat that lingers on the surface of Lance's skin like a damp sweater that he's shrugged on for the trip.

Shiro, next to him, taps his fingers against the steering wheel, crawling the car into the empty highway as Lance spots their end goal, the gas station, just a little ways away. It's tucked alone on a vast gravel stretch in the dark, the lights overhead sputtering and stalling and reading out a silly "Tex—Texaco—xco—Texa—" as though on a

scheduled timer.

He rests his palm flat against the exterior of the car through the open window, drops his head to his shoulder and admires the faint red glow of the overhead lights bathing the parking lot of a wide halo of scarlet. The car climbs over the dip in the road, slides over crunchy gravel and slows gradually, halting with a slight squeak of the brakes in front of one of the two gas pumps that isn't marked with messy yellow tape and a boldly handwritten sign that says "OUT OF ORDER" through water stains and fat insects that seem to coat just about every surface in this humid new environment.

Lance can see the clerk at the counter through the lighted interior craning their neck and squinting their eyes in an attempt to peer out into the dark and spot them. He feels for a moment as though he's gazing into a looking glass at an alternate version of his past self. He feels distantly like he's come home to meet an old friend.

Not the clerk or the bugs or anyone else who occupies this unfamiliar town, but… maybe just this new home. Maybe all of this. The culmination of all of his past dreams accumulated into a sudden reality that never feels like more than a living fantasy.

Shiro releases his seatbelt with a soft click, pulls himself through his now open car door and heaves a long, pleasured breath as he eases out the kinks in his muscles.

"It's been a long drive," he says over the top of the car, just as Lance slips on his shoes, climbing out and stretching his poor, contorted spine, "We're almost there."

Lance spits a laugh through his teeth.

"I'm not gonna step foot in a car for at least a year after this."

Shiro's new grin is handsome even under swaths of ominous red light. Lance feels a feeble amount of movement from the trunk, hears the skitters of it thrumming restlessly as the creature trapped inside wakes up.

Shiro's eyes snap back to the source as well. He runs a slow tongue between his lips, sobered swiftly as he steps back and closes the driver's side door. He turns to Lance, his smile returning softer, flicks his eyes then to the clerk still watching them from a brightly-lit lobby, and combs a hand through his sweat-tousled hair.

“We should get a move on it, to make sure that we’re far away from here when we let Keith out.”

Lance nods as well. He isn’t sure at first why they’d need to be afraid of Keith roaming close to this gas station since he’s been more than a little nervous about coming close to humans since everything happened with Sanda, but he wonders if perhaps Shiro just doesn’t want to risk anyone spotting Keith in terrain that Keith’s not quite familiar enough with to navigate discreetly.

It’s fair enough. Lance drums his knuckles twice over the lid of the trunk as he closes his door and slips past it. There’s a hard thunk from inside, clearly aggravated, as Lance knows very well, derisively well, that Keith hates it when he beats on the roof of his temporary bed.

But it seems to get the message across efficiently nonetheless. The restlessness dies away and it seems that, for now, Keith’s decided to get some more sleep.

Inside of the gas station, Lance ghosts his fingers over rows and rows of chip bags, caught for a moment in a memory of facing these same brands back at the convenience store in his home town and chatting through the gaps of the shelves with Hunk. Those memories sizzle like dead worms on a hot sidewalk after rainfall, feel too bright and saturated and so far away that he has trouble remembering them as more than a small collection of feelings. The sensation of the crinkly plastic between his fingers. Laughter bubbling up in his throat. Hunk’s boisterous amusement, his loud voice when he tells a joke. The two of them concentrated under bright, artificial light that now aches, too much, too raw, in Lance’s tired eyes.

He shakes his head, picks a bag of baked potato chips and slips over to the cold bar to snag a salad as well. There are three types to choose from: a chef’s ham salad with a hardboiled egg that he doesn’t trust in the slightest, a caesar salad already drowned in dressing over the wilted, darkened leaves, and a grilled chicken salad that he clicks his tongue and selects instead, the safest option with the liveliest greens and a small cup of dressing still kept separate enough from the rest of it that he hopes that it won’t be too soggy.

Shiro is perusing the sandwiches again, but Lance still feels bloated from last night’s bread-heavy dinner, still feels as though he might gain twenty pounds just from this week-long road trip that he’ll

agonize over losing for the next year and a half. He's still not totally positive how his body works these days, if he can gain and maintain weight or muscle or if it's even worth watching what he eats because the sustenance that he provides for himself means very little when he can't die anyway. And while he's definitely seen Shiro conquer a few impressively large fast-food meals on their route here, he doesn't seem to have gained or lost any definition. Despite the relaxing last eight months that they've spent in California without any difficult heavy lifting and replaced instead by endless lazy hours spent sleeping in the sun, Shiro remains just as pale and firm like an ice sculpture shipped here from Colorado and kept preserved in his own personal bubble of cold. But even still, even if it really doesn't matter how much he pigs out or what he shoves in his mouth or how little exercise he gets, he just wants to switch things up.

He wants to feel at least the vaguest recognition within himself, as though he hasn't changed at all since they left. As though he's still a normal guy living a normal, human life. And he still worries about things like calories or food poisoning. Like the questionable state of those chicken salad sandwiches that Shiro's got his eye on across the store. Like what the clerk might think of both of them, curiously alone here at such a late hour, skimming through the food selection as though anyone traveling through these parts would be dumb enough to do so unprepared and entirely dependent on spotty gas stations located at varied highway exits. Quiet and focused and strangely "off" in ways that Lance had noticed about Shiro, too, once upon a time. The two of them, just inhuman enough to seem out of place and subtly otherworldly in any location that they temporarily haunt.

He wonders what he would have told Hunk about customers like them when he still worked at the convenience store. Wonders if perhaps this poor kid in his oversized red uniform with his tired eyes and puffy, heat-damaged skin might carry this weird memory with him curiously for many long days to come.

But they'll be long gone by the time that any of that matters. And no one is even looking for them anymore.

He collects his things, rejoining Shiro and offering him a firm look of disapproval as he inspects a few different questionable sandwiches with the "-salad" suffix that Lance has so learned to be wary of at gas stations lately. Shiro's olive branch is extended tonight in the form of a soft, bashful smile as he sets them down and opts, instead, for a plastic-wrapped turkey sandwich that's sitting alone near the bottom of the shelf. They grab drinks from the cooler and carry their dinner to

the counter. The clerk straightens himself out and greets them in stilted, nervous words that Lance answers gracefully, maybe too naturally, maybe too smooth and even and calm considering how strange the two of them might feel to a regular, unassuming person.

Shiro buys a carton of cigarettes and replenishes the lighter fluid that's been running low in his lighter. They thank the poor kid and pay the bill, and Shiro pumps gas outside of the car as Lance tucks himself inside and unpacks their bags, setting their sandwiches and drinks on their respective sides and in their respective cup holders.

Lance listens to the slow drone of the music playing overhead, rests himself back against his seat with his salad container and plastic cutlery in his lap. He watches the way that the bugs flit around in the artificial spotlights beamed down in red around the car. The gas pump clicks as Shiro finishes filling the tank. Lance watches him lazily through the driver's side window as he hangs the pump back in the cradle and screws the gas nozzle shut, brushing his hand over his pants to wipe it off and opening the door before sliding back inside.

He offers Lance a welcoming smile and thanks him for unpacking their things, clicking his seatbelt back in place over his chest before starting the car.

Lance marvels privately at the graceful way that he's able to drive and eat one-handed, wondering with wry, dark humor exactly how Keith would react if he were to swerve off the road and wreck the car. It would hurt like Hell, sure, but Lance doesn't think that it could kill them. It would be inconvenient to procure another vehicle after the trouble that they've gone through for this one, but ultimately, sans a few bumps and bruises and an additional sour beginning to Keith's night, he isn't sure if anything could actually hurt them anymore.

And it's a nice feeling that ebbs in belatedly. He shoves wilted lettuce in his mouth as he thinks about being bulletproof.

He talks to Shiro, once they've finished dinner and collected their wrappers and empty drink containers in their plastic bags by Lance's feet, about their new home and decorating. Asking him for what must be the dozenth time if he remembers the square footage and which directions the windows face in, and how many of them they'll have to cover in adhesive once they officially move in.

They chat about this for a few quiet, empty miles of straight highway, until Shiro clicks on his blinker and pulls the car into a barren parking

lot set strangely just before the mouth of thick woods collect at the far end of it. It seems to be the entrance to hunting ground, which out of season, now, is probably the best place for them to settle down for the night. Shiro turns to him with a small upturning of his lips.

“It’s time to let him out,” he says, “I’m sure he’s not going to wait much longer before he starts hitting the trunk lid again.”

Lance breathes a quiet laugh, undoing his seatbelt and stepping outside, closing his door behind him and falling back, for a moment, to rest his weight over the surface of it. Shiro rounds the front of the car and meets him, takes a short moment to ghost a hand under his chin and tip it up, to kiss him softly and fleetingly and to spread out that soft smile, to gaze down at him as though he’s admiring an old photo album or a novel he’s loved for many years, or anything beautiful and fragile and deserving of his devotion in a way that makes butterflies shudder in the depths of Lance’s chest.

“I’m really happy that you’re here,” Shiro tells him.

Lance bites his lip, turning his eyes away. New warmth springs up under the surface of his cheeks, blistering in the everpresent, boggy heat that’s so heavy around them that Lance has trouble breathing in it.

“Me too.”

The night around them is thriving with life and the air is thick with itchy warmth and humidity as though Lance is churning in shallow water. It’s sticky and the bugs roosting for short seconds on his skin prickle where their legs grasp at him. The mosquitos don’t know what to do with him, maybe, and he follows Shiro, scratches the long-healed bite marks that offer him phantom twinges as he thinks about the monster that waits for them inside of the trunk.

As excitement spikes inside of him and he finds himself suddenly eager, once again, for tonight to start so it can pass slowly. For the three of them to reach their destination deep in the belly of this state tomorrow.

For the rest of their lives, finally, to begin.

The trunk pops open and Lance finds himself drawn into the first in a long series of adventures that will make up the rest of his long life.

A new chapter, perhaps, in an ever-evolving collection of his past and

present and limitless future rolling out so far ahead that he can't even imagine where it might lead.

This story of theirs is slow and sometimes flawed and sometimes treacherous, but it isn't a story about pain or tragedy, not really. It's not a story about loss or mourning, or even monsters that creep through the dark and unsuspecting night. It's a story, instead, about hope and moving on, in memory of an innocent life lost, of an endless winter, and a love so beautiful that it survives even beyond death.

This is the story about how Lance McClain died and found himself reborn for an eternity that he begins, now, as Keith awakens from sleep and climbs slowly out of the trunk of Shiro's car, welcomed by the infinite black night.

And Lance's warm smile, Shiro's gentle kiss. The three of them together, finally, after scrambling for so long to find each other.

Chapter End Notes

The end :)
I wanna take a minute just to thank everyone for reading this from beginning to end! It means a lot to me that you shared this journey with me, and I've really, genuinely appreciated every person who I've been able to meet and get to know because of this story!
And I'd like to thank Epi, as well, for being the entire reason why this story existed in the first place. I know it was a long process, but your support and love have been an endless source of inspiration every step of the way. So ten months later, I hope that you had a happy birthday! And that this was at least a somewhat adequate gift compared to everything that you've done for me.
So, with much love, we end En Memoria.
Thank you so much, once again, for spending time with this story.
xoxo,
Moth

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!